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JUDITH SHAKESPEARE



JUDITH SHAKESPEARE

A Romance

BY

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CONTENTS.

CHAPTER I.

	PAGE
AN APPEAL	I

CHAPTER II.

TO LONDON TOWN	24
--------------------------	----

CHAPTER III.

EVIL TIDINGS	38
------------------------	----

CHAPTER IV.

RENEWALS	60
--------------------	----

CHAPTER V.

'THE ROSE IS FROM MY GARDEN GONE'	79
---	----

CHAPTER VI.

IN TIME OF NEED	103
---------------------------	-----

CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
A LOST ARCADIA	128

CHAPTER VIII.

A RESOLVE	154
---------------------	-----

CHAPTER IX.

ARRIVALS	181
--------------------	-----

CHAPTER X.

AN AWAKENING	197
------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XI.

TOWARDS THE LIGHT	222
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XII.

'WESTERN WIND, WHEN WILL YOU BLOW?' .	242
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JUDITH SHAKESPEARE.

CHAPTER I.

AN APPEAL.

GREAT changes were in store. To begin with, there were rumours of her father being about to return to London. Then Dr. Hall was summoned away into Worcestershire by a great lady living there, who was continually fancying herself at the brink of death, and manifesting on such occasions a terror not at all in consonance with her professed assurance that she was going to a happier sphere. As it was possible that Dr. Hall would seize this opportunity to pay several other professional visits in the neighbouring county, it was proposed that Susan and her daughter should come for a while to New Place, and that Judith should at the same time go and

stay with her grandmother at Shottery, to cheer the old dame somewhat. And so it happened, on this July morning, that Judith's mother having gone round to see her elder daughter about all these arrangements, Judith found herself not only alone in the house, but—as rarely chanced—with nothing to do.

She tried to extract some music from her sister's lute, but that was a failure; she tried half a dozen other things; and then it occurred to her—for the morning was fine and clear, and she was fond of the meadows, and of open air and sunlight—that she would walk round to the Grammar School and beg for a half-holiday for Willie Hart. He, as well as Bess Hall, was under her tuition; and there were things she could teach him of quite as much value (as she considered) as anything to be learned at a desk. At the same time, before going to meet the staring eyes of all those boys, she thought she might as well repair to her own room and smarten up her attire—even to the extent, perhaps, of putting on her gray beaver hat, with the row of brass beads.

That was not at all necessary. Nothing

of the kind was needful to make Judith Shakespeare attractive and fascinating and wonderful to that crowd of lads. The fact was, the whole school of them were more or less secretly in love with her; and this, so far from procuring Willie Hart such bumps and thrashings as he might have received from a solitary rival, gained for him, on the contrary, a mysterious favour and goodwill that showed itself in a hundred subtle ways. For he was in a measure the dispenser of Judith's patronage. When he was walking along the street with her he would tell her the name of this one or that of his companions (in case she had forgotten), and she would stop and speak to him kindly, and hope he was getting on well with his tasks. Also the older lads, on the strength of Willie Hart's intermediation, would now make bold to say, with great politeness, 'Give ye good-morrow, Mistress Judith,' when they met her; and sometimes she would pause for a moment, and chat with one of them, and make some inquiries of him as to whether her cousin did not occasionally need a little help in his lessons from the bigger boys. Then there

was a kind of fury of assistance instantly promised; and the youth would again remember his good manners, and bid her formally farewell, and go on his way, with his heart and his cheeks alike afire and his brain gone a-dancing. Even that dread being, the head-master, had no frown for her when she went boldly up to his desk, in the very middle of the day's duties, to demand some favour. Nay, he would rather detain her with a little pleasant conversation, and would at times become almost facetious (at sight of which the spirits of the whole school rose into a seventh heaven of equanimity). And always she got what she wanted; and generally, before leaving, she would give one glance down the rows of oaken benches, singling out her friends here and there, and alas! not thinking at all of the deadly wounds she was thus dealing with those lustrous and shining eyes.

Well, on this morning she had no difficulty in rescuing her cousin from the dull captivity of the schoolroom; and hand-in-hand they went along and down to the river-side and to the meadows there. But seemingly she had

no wish to get much farther from the town ; for the truth was that she lacked assurance as yet that Master Leofric Hope had left that neighbourhood ; and she was distinctly of a mind to avoid all further communications with him until, if ever, he should be able to come forward openly and declare himself to the small world in which she lived. Accordingly she did not lead Willie Hart far along the river-side path ; they rather kept to seeking about the banks and hedge-rows for wild flowers—the pink and white bells of the bindweed she was mostly after, and these did not abound there—until at last they came to a stile ; and there she sate down, and would have her cousin sit beside her, so that she should give him some further schooling as to all that he was to do, and think, and be in the coming years. She had far other things than Lilly's Grammar to teach him. The *Sententiæ Pueriles* contained no instructions as to how, for example, a modest and well-conducted youth should approach his love-maiden to discover whether her heart was well inclined towards him. And although her timid-eyed pupil seemed

to take but little interest in the fair creature that was thus being provided for him in the future, and was far more anxious to know how he was to win Judith's approval, either now or then, still he listened contentedly enough, for Judith's voice was soft and musical. Nay, he put that imaginary person out of his mind altogether. It was Judith, and Judith alone, whom he saw in these forecasts. Would he have any other supplant her, in his dreams and visions of what was to be? This world around him—the smooth-flowing Avon, the wooded banks, the wide white skies, the meadows and fields, and low-lying hills: was not she the very spirit, and central life and light of all these? Without her, what would these be?—dead things; the mystery and wonder gone out of them; a world in darkness. But he could not think of that; the world he looked forward to was filled with light; for Judith was there—the touch of her hand as gentle as ever; her eyes still as kind.

‘So must you be accomplished at all points, sweetheart,’ she was continuing, ‘that you shame her not in any company, whatever

the kind of it may be. If they be grave, and speak of the affairs of the realm, then must you know how the country is governed, as becomes a man (though, being a woman, alack, I cannot help you there); and you must have opinions about what is best for England, and be ready to uphold them too. Then, if the company be of a gayer kind, again you shall not shame her, but take part in all the merriment; and if there be dancing, you shall not go to the door, and hang about like a booby; you must know the new dances, every one; for would you have your sweetheart dance with others, and you standing by? That were a spite, I take it, for both of you!—nay, would not the wench be angry to be so used? Let me see, now—what is the name of it?—the one that is danced to the tune of *The Merchant's Daughter went over the Field*?—have I shown you that, sweetheart?’

‘I know not, cousin Judith,’ said he.

‘Come, then,’ said she, blithely; and she took him by the hand, and placed him opposite her in the meadow. ‘Look you, now, the four at the top cross hands—so—

you must imagine the other two, sweetheart—and all go round once—so; and then they change hands, and go back the other way—so; and then each takes his own partner, and away they go round the circle, and back to their place. Is it not simple, cousin? Come, now, let us try properly.'

And so they began again; and for music she lightly hummed a verse of a song that was commonly sung to the same tune:

*'Maid, will you love me, yes or no?
Tell me the truth, and let me go.'*

'The other hand, Willie—quick!'

*'It can be no less than a sinful deed
(Trust me truly),
To linger a lover that looks to speed
(In due time duly).'*

'Why, is it not simple?' she said, laughing. 'But now, instead of crossing hands, I think it far the prettier way that they should hold their hands up together—so: shall we try it, sweetheart?'

And then she had to sing another verse of the ballad:

*‘Consider, sweet, what sighs and sobs,
Do nip my heart with cruel throbs,
And all, my dear, for the love of you
(Trust me truly):
But I hope that you will some mercy show
(In due time duly).’*

‘And then,’ she continued, when they had finished that laughing rehearsal, ‘should the fiddles begin to squeal and screech—which is as much as to say, “Now, all of you, kiss your partners!”—then shall you not bounce forward and seize the wench by the neck—as if you were a ploughboy besotted with ale—and have her hate thee for destroying her head-gear and her hair. No; you shall come forward in this manner, as if to do her great courtesy; and you shall take her hand and bend one knee; and make partly a jest of it, but not altogether a jest, and then you shall kiss her hand, and rise and retire. Think you the maiden will not be proud that you have shown her so much honour and respect in public?—ay, and when she and you are thereafter together by yourselves, I doubt not but that she may be willing to make up to you for your forbearance and courteous treatment of her. Marry, with that I have naught

to do; 'tis as the heart of the wench may happen to be inclined, though you may trust me she will be well content that you show her other than ale-house manners: and if 'tis but a matter of a kiss that you forego—because you would pay her courtesy in public—why, then, as I say, she may make that up to thee, or she is no woman else. I wonder, now, what the Bonnybel will be like—or tall, or dark, or fair——'

'I wish never to see her, Judith,' said he, simply.

However, there was to be no further discussion of this matter, nor yet green-sward rehearsals of dancing; for they now descried coming to them the little maid who waited on Judith's grandmother. She seemed in a hurry, and had a basket over her arm.

'How now, little Cicely?' Judith said, as she drew near.

'I have sought you everywhere, so please you, Mistress Judith,' the little maid said, breathlessly, 'for I was coming into the town—on some errands—and—and I met the stranger gentleman that came once or twice

to the house, and—and he would have me carry a message to you——’

‘Prithee, good lass,’ said Judith, instantly, and with much composure, ‘go thy way back home. I wish for no message.’

‘He seemed in sore distress,’ the little maid said, diffidently.

‘How, then? Did a gentleman of his tall inches seek help from such a mite as thou?’

‘He would fain see you, sweet mistress, and but for a moment,’ the girl answered, being evidently desirous of getting the burden of the message off her mind. ‘He bid me say he would be in the lane going to Bidford, or thereabout, for the next hour or two, and would crave a word with you—out of charity, the gentleman said, or something of the like—and that it might be the last chance of seeing you ere he goes, and that I was to give his message to you very secretly.’

Well, she scarcely knew what to do. At their last interview he had pleaded for another opportunity of saying farewell to her, and she had not definitely refused; but, on the other hand, she would much rather have seen nothing further of him in these present cir-

cumstances. His half-reckless references to Prince Ferdinand undergoing any kind of hardship for the sake of winning the fair Miranda were of a dangerous cast. She did not wish to meet him on that ground at all, even to have her suspicions removed. But if he were really in distress? And this his last day in the neighbourhood? It seemed a small matter to grant.

‘What say you, cousin Willie?’ said she, good-naturedly. ‘Shall we go and see what the gentleman would have of us? I cannot, unless with thee as my shield and champion.’

‘If you wish it, cousin Judith,’ said he: what would he not do that she wished?

‘And Cicely—shall we all go?’

‘Nay, so please you, Mistress Judith,’ the girl said; ‘I have to go back for my errands. I have been running everywhere to seek you.’

‘Then, Willie, come along,’ said she, lightly; ‘we must get across the fields to the Evesham road.’

And so the apple-cheeked little maiden trudged back to the town with her basket, while Judith and her companion went on their way across the meadows. There was a kind

of good-humoured indifference in her consent, though she felt anxious that the interview should be as brief as possible. She had had more time of late to think over all the events that had recently happened—startling events enough in so quiet and even a life; and occasionally she bethought her of the wizard, and of the odd coincidence of her meeting this young gentleman at the very spot that had been named. She had tried to laugh aside certain recurrent doubts and surmises; and was only partially successful. And she had a vivid recollection of the relief she had experienced when their last interview came to an end.

‘You must gather me some flowers, sweetheart,’ said she, ‘while I am speaking to this gentleman; perchance he may have something to say of his own private affairs.’

‘I will go on to your grandmother’s garden,’ said he, ‘if you wish it, cousin Judith, and get you the flowers there.’

‘Indeed, no,’ she answered, patting him on the shoulder. ‘Would you leave me without my champion? Nay, but if you stand aside a little that the gentleman may speak in con-

fidence, if such should be his pleasure—surely that will be enough.’

They had scarcely entered the lane when he made his appearance; and the moment she set eyes on him she saw that something had happened. His face seemed haggard and anxious—nay, his very manner was changed. Where was the elaborate courtesy with which he had been wont to approach her?’

‘Judith,’ said he, hurriedly, ‘I must risk all now. I must speak plain. I—I scarce hoped you would give me the chance.’

But she was in no alarm.

‘Now, sweetheart,’ said she, calmly, to the little lad, ‘you may get me the flowers, and if you find any more of the bindweed bells and the St. John’s wort so much the better.’

Then she turned to Master Leofric Hope.

‘I trust you have had no ill news,’ said she, but in a kind way.

‘Indeed I have. Well, I know not which way to take it,’ he said, in a sort of desperate fashion. ‘It might be good news. But I am hard pressed; ’twill be sink or swim with me presently. Well, there is one way of

safety open to me ; 'tis for you to say whether I shall take it or not.'

'I, sir ?' she said ; and she was so startled that she almost recoiled a step.

'Nay, but first I must make a confession,' said he, quickly, 'whatever comes of it. Think of me what you will, I will tell you the truth. Shall I beg for your forgiveness beforehand ?'

He was regarding her earnestly and anxiously ; and there was nothing but kindness and a certain expression of concern in the honest frank face and in the beautiful eyes.

'No, I will not,' he said. 'Doubtless you will be angry, and with just cause ; and you will go away. Well, this is the truth. The devils of usurers were after me ; I had some friends not far from here ; I escaped to them ; and they sought out this hiding for me. Then I had heard of you—you will not forgive me, but this is the truth—I had heard of your beauty ; and Satan himself put it into my head that I must see you. I thought it would be a pastime, to while away this cursed hiding if I could get to know you without discovering myself. I sent you a message. I was myself the wizard. Heaven is my wit-

ness that when I saw you at the corner of the field up there, and heard you speak, and looked on your gracious and gentle ways, remorse went to my heart ; but how could I forego seeking to see you again ? It was a stupid jest. It was begun in thoughtlessness ; but now the truth is before you ; I was myself the wizard ; and—and my name is not Leofric Hope, but John Orridge—a worthless poor devil that is ashamed to stand before you.'

Well, the colour had mounted to her face ; for she saw clearly the invidious position that this confession had placed her in ; but she was far less startled than he had expected ; she had already regarded this trick as a possible thing ; and she had also fully considered what she ought to do in such circumstances. Now, when the circumstances were actually laid before her, she made no display of wounded pride, or of indignant anger, or anything of the kind.

'I pray you,' said she, with a perfect and simple dignity, 'pass from that. I had no such firm belief in the wizard's prophecies. I took you as you represented yourself to be,

a stranger, met by chance, one who was known to my father's friends, and who was in misfortune; and if I have done aught beyond what I should have done in such a pass, I trust you will put it down to our country manners, that are perchance less guarded than those of the town.'

For an instant—there was not the slightest doubt of it—actual tears stood in the young man's eyes.

'By heavens,' he exclaimed, 'I think you must be the noblest creature God ever made! You do not drive me away in scorn—you have no reproaches? And I—to be standing here—telling you such a tale——'

'I pray you, sir, pass from that,' said she. 'What of your own fortunes? You are quitting the neighbourhood?'

'But how can you believe me in anything, since you know how I have deceived you?' said he—as if he could not understand how she should make no sign of her displeasure.

''Twas but a jest, as you say,' she answered, good-naturedly (but still with a trifle of reserve). 'And no harm has come of it. I would leave it aside, good sir.'

‘Harm?’ said he, looking at her with a kind of anxious timidity. ‘That may or may not be, sweet lady, as time will show. If I dared but speak to you—well, bethink you of my meeting you here from day to day—in these quiet retreats—and seeing such a sweetness and beauty and womanliness as I have never met with in the world before—such a wonder of gentleness and kindness——’

‘I would ask you to spare me these compliments,’ said she, simply. ‘I thought ’twas some serious matter you had in hand.’

‘Serious enough, i’ faith!’ he said, in an altered tone, as if she had recalled him to a sense of the position in which he stood. ‘But there is the one way out of it, after all. I can sell my life away, for money to pacify those fiends; nay, besides that, I should live in abundance, doubtless, and be esteemed a most fortunate gentleman, and one to be envied. A gilded prison-house and slavery; but what would the fools think of that if they saw me with a good fat purse at the tavern?’

Again he regarded her.

‘There is another way yet, however ; if I must needs trouble you, dear Mistress Judith, with my poor affairs. What if I were to break with that accursed London altogether, and go off and fight my way in another country, as many a better man hath done ; ay, and there be still one or two left who would help me to escape if they saw me on the way to reform, as they would call it. And what would I not do in that way—ay, or in any way—if I could hope for a certain prize to be won at the end of it all ?’

‘And that, good sir ?’

‘That,’ said he, watching her face—‘the reward that would be enough, and more than enough, for all I might suffer would be just this—to find Judith Shakespeare coming to meet me in this very lane.’

‘Oh no, sir,’ was her immediate and incoherent exclamation ; and then she promptly pulled herself together, and said, with some touch of pride : ‘Indeed, good sir, you talk wildly. I scarce understand how you can be in such grave trouble.’

‘Then,’ said he—and he was rather pale, and spoke slowly—‘it would be no manner of

use for any poor Ferdinand of these our own days to go bearing logs or suffering any hardships that might arise? There would be no Miranda waiting for him, after all?’

She coloured deeply; she could not affect to misunderstand the repeated allusion; and all she had in her mind now was to leave him and get away from him—and yet without unkindness or anger.

‘Good sir,’ said she, with such equanimity as she could muster, ‘if that be your meaning—if that be why you wished to see me again—and no mere continuance of an idle jest, plain speech will best serve our turn. I trust no graver matters occupy your mind; as for this, you must put that away. It was with no thought of any such thing that I—that I—met you once or twice—and—and—lent you such reading as might pass the time for you. And perchance I was too free in that, and in my craving to hear of my father and his friends in London, and the rest. But what you say now—if I understand you aright—well, I had no thought of any such thing—indeed, good sir, if I have done wrong

in listening to you about my father's friends—'twas in the hope that or soon or late you would continue the tale in my father's house. But now—what you say—bids me to leave you—and yet in no anger—for in truth I wish you well.'

She gave him her hand; and he held it for a moment.

'Is this your last word, Judith?' said he.

'Yes, yes, indeed,' she answered, rather breathlessly and earnestly. 'I may not see you again. I pray heaven your troubles may soon be over; and perchance you may meet my father in London, and become one of his friends; then might I hear of your better fortunes. 'Twould be welcome news, believe me. And now fare you well.'

He stooped to touch her hand with his lips; but he said not a word; and she turned away without raising her eyes. He stood there, motionless and silent, watching her and the little boy as they walked along the lane towards the village—regarding them in an absent kind of way, and yet with no great expression of sadness or hopelessness in his face. Then he turned and made for the

highway to Bidford; and he was saying to himself as he went along—

‘Well, there goes one chance in life for good or ill. And what if I had been more persistent? What if she had consented, or even half-consented, or said that in the future I might come back with some small modicum of hope? Nay, the devil only knows where I should get logs to carry for the winning of so fair a reward. Frank Lloyd is right. My case is too desperate. So fare you well, sweet maiden; keep you to your quiet meadows and your wooded lanes; and the clown that will marry you will give you a happier life than ever you could have had with Jack Orridge and his broken fortunes.’

Indeed, he seemed in no downcast mood. As he walked along the highway he was absently watching the people in the distant fields, or idly whistling the tune of *Calen o Custure me*. But by and by, as he drew near the farm, his face assumed a more sombre look; and when, coming still nearer, he saw Frank Lloyd calmly standing at the door of the stables, smoking his pipe, there

was a sullen frown on his forehead that did not promise well for the cheerfulness of that journey to London which Master Lloyd had sworn he would not undertake until his friend was ready to accompany him.

CHAPTER II.

TO LONDON TOWN.

BUT that was not the departure for London which was soon to bring Judith a great heaviness of heart, and cause many a bitter fit of crying when that she was lying awake o' nights. She would rather have let all her lovers go, and welcome, a hundred times over. But as the days passed, it became more and more evident, from certain preparations, that her father was about to leave Stratford for the south ; and finally the very moment was fixed. Judith strove to keep a merry face (for so she had been bid), but again and again she was on the point of going to him and falling on her knees and begging him to remain with them. She knew that he would laugh at her ; but did he quite know what going away from them meant ? And the use of it ? Had they not

abundance? Still, she was afraid of being chid for meddling in matters beyond her; and so she went about her duties with as much cheerfulness as she could assume; though, when in secret conclave with Prudence, and talking of this and what the house would be like when he was gone, quiet tears would steal down her face in the dusk.

To suit the convenience of one or two neighbours, who were also going to London, the day of departure had been postponed; but at last the fatal morning arrived. Judith, from an early hour, was on the watch, trying to get some opportunity of saying good-bye to her father by herself (and not before all the strangers who would soon be gathering together), but always she was defeated, for he was busy in-doors with many things, and every one was lending a helping hand. Moreover, she was in an excited and trembling state; and more than once she had to steal away to her chamber and bathe her eyes with water, lest that they should tell any tale when he should see her. But the climax of her misfortunes was this. When

the hour of leaving was drawing nigh she heard him go out and into the garden, doubtless with the intention of locking up the cupboard in the summer-house ; and so she presently and swiftly stole out after him, thinking that now would be her chance. Alas ! the instant she had passed through the back-court door, she saw that Matthew gardener had forestalled her ; and not only that, but he had brought a visitor with him—the master constable, Grandfather Jeremy, whom she knew well. Anger filled her heart ; but this was no time to stand on her dignity. She would not retire from the field. She walked forward boldly, and stood by her father's side, as much as to say—‘ Well, this is my place. What do you want ? Why this intrusion at such a time ? ’

Grandfather Jeremy was a little, thin, round-shouldered ancient, with long straggling gray hair, and small, shrewd, ferret-like eyes, that kept nervously glancing from Judith's father to goodman Matthew, who had obviously introduced him on this occasion. Indeed, the saturnine visage of the gardener was overspread with a complacent grin, as

though he were saying—‘Look you there, zur, there be a rare vool.’ Judith’s father, on the other hand, showed no impatience over this interruption; he kept waiting for the old man to recover his power of speech.

‘Well now, master constable, what would you?’ he said, gently.

‘Why can’t ’ee tell his worship, Jeremy?’ Matthew gardener said, in his superior and facetious fashion. ‘Passion o’ me, man, thy tongue will wag fast enough at Mother Tooley’s ale-house.’

‘It wur a contrevarsie, so please your worship,’ the ancient constable said, but with a kind of vacant stare, as if he were half-lost in looking back into his memory.

‘Ay, and with whom?’ said Judith’s father, to help him along.

‘With my poor old woman, so please your worship. She be a poor mean creature in your honour’s eyes, I make no doubt, but she hath wisdom, she hath, and a strength in contrevarsie past most. Lord, Lord, why be I standing here now—and holding your worship—and your worship’s time and necessities—but that she saith, “Jeremy, put thy

better leg avore :” “speak out,” saith she, “’twur as good for thee as a half-ox in a pie, or a score of angels in thy pouch.” “Speak out,” she saith, “and be not afraid, Jeremy.”’

‘But, master constable,’ said Judith’s father, ‘if your good dame be such a Mary Ambree in argument, she should have furnished you with fewer words and more matter. What would you?’

‘Nay, zur, I be as bold as most,’ said the constable, pulling up his courage, and also elevating his head somewhat with an air of authority. ‘I can raise hue and cry in the hundred, that can I; and if the watch bring me a rogue he shall lie by the heels, or I am no true man. But, Lord, zur, have pity on a poor man that be put forward to speak for a disputation. When they wur talking of it at furst, your worship—this one and the other, and all of them to once—and would have me go forward to speak for them—“Zure,” says I, “I would as lief go to a bride-ale with my legs swaddled in wisps as go avore Mahster Shaksper without a power o’ voine words.” But Joan, she saith, “Jeremy, fear no man, howsoever great, for there be

but the one Lord over us all ; perzent thyself like a true countryman and an honest officer ; take thy courage with thee," saith she ; "and remember thou speakest vor thy friends as well as vor thyself. 'Tis a right good worshipful gentleman," she saith, meaning yourself, sweet Mahster Shaksper ; "and will a not give us a share ? "'

'In heaven's name, man,' said Judith's father, laughing, 'what would you ? Had Joan no clearer message to give you ?'

'I but speak her words, so please your worship,' said the ancient constable, with the air of one desperately trying to recall a lesson that had been taught him. 'And all of them—they wur zaying as how she hath a power o' wisdom—and "Jeremy," she saith, "be not over bold with the worthy gentleman ; 'tis but a share ; and he be a right worthy and civil gentleman ; speak him fair, Jeremy," she saith, "and put thy better leg avore, and acquit thee as a man. Nay, be bold," she saith, "and think of thy vriends that be waiting without for an answer. Think of them, Jeremy," she saith, "if thy speech fail thee ; 'tis but a share ; 'tis but a share ;

and he a right worshipful and civil gentleman.”’

Judith’s father glanced at the sundial on the gable of the barn.

‘My good friend,’ said he, ‘I hear that your wife Joan is ailing; ’tis through no lack of breath, I warrant me. An’ you come not to the point forthwith, I must be gone. What would you? Or what would your good dame have of me—for there we shall get to it more quickly.’

‘So please you, zur,’ said Matthew, with his complacent grin, ‘the matter be like this now: this worthy master constable and his comrades of the watch, they wur laying their heads together like; and they have heard say that you have written of them, and taken of their wisdom the couple o’ nights they wur brought in to supper; and they see as how you have grown rich, so please you, zur, with such writing——’

‘A vast o’ money—a vast o’ money and lands,’ the other murmured.

‘And now, zur, they would make bold to ask for their share, for the help that they have given you. Nay, zur,’ continued Matthew

gardener, who was proud of the ease with which he could put into words the inarticulate desires of this good constable, 'be not angry with worthy Jeremy : he but speaketh for the others—and for his wife Joan, too, that be as full of courage as any of them, and would have come to your worship but that she be sore troubled with an ague. Lord, zur, I know not how much the worthy gentlemen want. Perchance good Jeremy would be content wi' the barn and the store of malt in the malt-house——'

At this the small deep eyes of the ancient began to twinkle nervously ; and he glanced in an anxious way from one to the other.

'And the watch, now,' continued Matthew, grinning, and looking at the old constable, 'why, zur, they be poor men ; 'twould go well with them to divide amongst them the store of good wine in the cellar, and perchance also the leather hangings that be so much talked of in the town. But hark you, good Jeremy, remember this now—that whoever hath the garden and orchard fall to his lot must pay me my wages, else 'tis no bargain.'

For the first time in her life Judith saw her father in a passion of anger. His colour did not change; but there was a strange look about his mouth, and his eyes blazed.

‘Thou cursed fool,’ he said to the gardener, ‘’tis thou hast led these poor men into this folly.’ And then he turned to the bewildered constable, and took him by the arm. ‘Come, good friend,’ said he, in a kindly way, ‘come into the house, and I will explain these matters to thee. Thou hast been misled by this impudent knave—by my life I will settle that score with him ere long; and, in truth, the aid that you and your comrades have given me is chiefly that we have passed a pleasant evening or two together, and been merry or wise as occasion offered. And I would have you spend such another to-night, among yourselves, leaving the charges at the ale-house to me; and for the present, if I may not divide my store of wine among you, ’tis no reason why you and I should not have a parting cup, ere I put hand to bridle——’

That was all that Judith heard; and then she turned to the ancient wiseman and said, coolly—

‘Were I in thy place, good Matthew, I would get me out of this garden, and out of Stratford town too, ere my father come back.’ And Matthew was too frightened to answer her.

The outcome of all this, however, was that Judith’s father did not return to the garden; and when she went into the house she found that he had taken such time to explain to Jeremy constable how small a share in his writings had been contributed by these good people that certain of the members of the expedition bound for London had already arrived. Indeed, their horses and attendants were at the door; and all and everything was in such a state of confusion and uproar that Judith saw clearly she had no chance of saying a quiet good-bye to her father all by herself. But was she to be again balked by goodman Matthew? She thought not. She slipped away by the back-door, and disappeared.

There was quite a little crowd gathered to see the cavalcade move off. Dr. Hall was not there, but Tom Quiney was—bringing with him, as a parting gift for Judith’s father,

a handsome riding-whip—and the worthy Parson Blaise had also appeared, though there was no opportunity for his professional services amid so much bustle. And then there were hand-shakings, and kissings, and farewells; and Judith's father was just about to put his foot in the stirrup when Susanna called out—

‘But where is Judith? Is she not coming to say good-bye to my father?’

Then there were calls for Judith here, there, and everywhere—but no answer; and her mother was angry that the girl should detain all this assemblage. But her father, not having mounted, went rapidly through the house, and just opened the door leading into the garden. The briefest glance showed him that the mastiff was gone. Then he hurried back.

‘’Tis all well, good mother,’ said he, as he got into the saddle. ‘I shall see the wench ere I go far. I know her tricks.’

So the company moved away from the house, and through the streets, and down to Clopton's bridge. Once over the bridge, they struck to the right, taking the Oxford

road by Shipston and Enstone ; and ere they had gone far along the highway, Judith's father, who seemed less to join in the general hilarity and high spirits of the setting out than to be keeping a watch around, perceived something in the distance—at a corner where there was a high bank behind some trees—that caused him to laugh slightly, and to himself. When they were come near this corner the figure that had been on the sky-line had disappeared ; but down by the roadside was Judith herself—looking very tremulous and ashamed as all these people came along—and the great Don standing by her. Her father, who had some knowledge of her ways, bade them all ride on ; and then he turned his horse, and sprang down from the saddle.

‘Well, wench,’ said he, and he took her by the shoulders, ‘what brings you here?’

In answer she could only burst into tears, and hide her face in his breast.

‘Why, lass,’ said he, ‘what is a journey to London ? And have you not enough left to comfort you ? Have you not sweethearts a plenty ?’

But she could not speak ; she only sobbed, and sobbed.

‘Come, come, lass, I must be going,’ said he, stroking the soft brown hair. ‘Cheer up. Would’st thou spoil the prettiest eyes in Warwickshire? Nay, and thou have not a right merry and beaming face when I am come again I will call thee no daughter of mine.’

Then she raised her head—for still she could not speak—and he kissed her.

‘Heaven’s blessings on thee, good wench; I think ’tis the last time I shall ever have the courage to leave thee. Fare you well, sweetheart : keep your eyes bright and your face happy—to draw me home again.’

Then she kissed him on each cheek ; and he got into the saddle and rode on. She climbed up to the top of the bank, and watched him and his companions while they were still in sight, and then she turned to go slowly homeward.

And it seemed to her when she came in view of Stratford, and looked down on the wide meadows, and the placid river, and the silent homesteads, that a sort of winter had

already fallen over the land. That long summer had been very beautiful to her—full of sunlight and colour and the scents of flowers; but now a kind of winter was come, and a sadness and loneliness, and the days and days that would follow each other seemed to have no longer any life in them.

CHAPTER III.

EVIL TIDINGS.

BUT a far sharper winter than any she had thought of was now about to come upon her ; and this was how it befell.

After the departure of her father, good Master Walter Blaise became more and more the guide and counsellor of these women-folk ; and, indeed, New Place was now given over to meetings for prayer and worship, and was also become the headquarters in the town for the entertainment of travelling preachers, and for the institution of all kinds of pious and charitable undertakings. There was little else for the occupants of it to do ; the head of the house was in London ; Judith was at Shottery with her grandmother ; Susanna was relieved from much of her own domestic cares by the absence of her husband in Worcestershire ; and the bailiff looked after all

matters pertaining to the farm. Indeed, so constant were these informal services and ministerings to pious travellers that Julius Shawe (though not himself much given in that direction, and perhaps mostly to please his sister) felt bound to interfere and offer to open his house on occasion, or pay part of the charges incurred through this kindly hospitality. Nay, he went privately to Master Blaise and threw out some vague hints as to the doubtful propriety of allowing a wife, in the absence of her husband, to be so ready with her charity. Now Master Blaise was an honest and straightforward man; and he met this charge boldly and openly. He begged of Master Shawe to come to New Place that very afternoon, when two or three of the neighbours were to assemble to hear him lecture; and both Prudence and her brother went. But before the lecture the parson observed that he had had a case of conscience put before him—as to the giving of alms and charity, by whom, for whom, and on whose authority—which he would not himself decide. The whole matter, he observed, had been pronounced

upon in the holiday lectures of that famous divine, Master William Perkins, who was now gone to his eternal reward, these lectures having recently been given to the world by the aid of one Thomas Pickering, of Emanuel College, Cambridge. And very soon it appeared, as the young parson read from the little parchment-covered book, that the passages he quoted had been carefully chosen and were singularly pertinent. For, after a discourse on the duty of almsgiving as enjoined by Scripture (and it was pointed out that Christ himself had lived on alms—‘not by begging, as the Papists affirm, but by the voluntary ministration and contribution of some to whom he preached’), Master Blaise read on, with an occasional glance at Julius Shawe—“‘It may be asked, whether the wife may give alms without the consent of her husband, considering that she is in subjection to another, and therefore all that she hath is another’s, and not her own. *Answer.* The wife may give alms of some things, but with these cautions: as first, she may give of those goods that she hath excepted from marriage. Secondly, she may give of those

things which are common to them both, provided it be with her husband's consent, at least general and implicit. Thirdly, she may not give without or against the consent of her husband. And the reason is, because both the law of nature and the Word of God command her obedience to her husband in all things. If it be alleged that Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, with others, did minister to Christ of their goods, Luke viii. 3, I answer: It is to be presumed that it was not done without all consent. Again, if it be said that Abigail brought a present to David, for the relief of him and his young men, whereof she made not Nabal her husband acquainted, 1 Sam. xxv. 19, I answer, It is true, but mark the reason. Nabal was generally of a churlish and unmerciful disposition, whereupon he was altogether unwilling to yield relief to any, in how great necessity soever; whence it was, that he railed on the young men that came to him, and drove them away, ver. 14. Again, he was a foolish man and given to drunkenness, so as he was not fit to govern his house or to dispense his alms. Besides that,

Abigail was a woman of great wisdom in all her actions, and that which she now did was to save Nabal's and her own life, yea, the lives of his whole family : for the case was desperate, and all that they had were in present hazard. The example, therefore, is no warrant for any woman to give alms, unless it be in the like case." And then he summed up in a few words ; saying, in effect, that as regards the question which had been put before him, it was for the wife to say whether she had her husband's general and implied consent to her pious expenditure, and to rule her accordingly.

This completely and for ever shut Julius Shawe's mouth. For he knew, and they all knew, that Judith's father was well content that any preachers or divines coming to the house should be generously received ; while he, on his part, claimed a like privilege in the entertainment of any vagrant person or persons (especially if they were making a shift to live by their wits) whom he might chance to meet. Strict economy in all other things was the rule of the household ; in the matter of hospitality the limits were wide. And if

Judith's mother half guessed, and if Susanna Hall shrewdly perceived why this topic had been introduced—and why Julius Shawe had been asked to attend the lecture—the subject was one that brought no sting to their conscience. If the whole question rested on the general and implied consent of the husband, Judith's mother had naught to tax herself with.

After that there was no further remonstrance (of however gentle and underhand a kind) on the part of Julius Shawe; and more and more did Parson Blaise become the guide, instructor, and mainstay of the household. They were women-folk, some of them timid, all of them pious; and they experienced a sense of comfort and safety in submitting to his spiritual domination. As for his disinterestedness, there could be no doubt of that; for now Judith was away at Shottery, and he could no longer pay court to her in that authoritative fashion of his. It seemed as if he were quite content to be with these others; bringing them the news of the day, especially as regarded the religious dissensions that were everywhere abroad; arranging for the

welcoming of this or that faithful teacher on his way through the country ; getting up meetings for prayer and profitable discourse in the afternoon ; or sitting quietly with them in the evening, while they went on with their tasks of dressmaking or embroidery.

And so it came about that Master Walter was in the house one morning—they were seated at dinner, indeed, and Prudence was also of the company—when a letter was brought in and handed to Judith's mother. It was an unusual thing ; and all saw by the look of it that it was from London ; and all were eager for the news—the good parson as well as any. There was not a word said as Judith's mother—with fingers that trembled a little from mere anticipation—opened the large sheet, and began to read to herself across the closely-written lines. And then as they waited, anxious for the last bit of tidings about the King or the Parliament or what not, they could not fail to observe a look of alarm come into the reader's face.

‘Oh, Susan,’ she said, in a way that startled them, ‘what is this ?’

She read on, breathless and stunned, her

face grown quite pale now ; and at last she stretched out her shaking hand with the letter in it.

‘ Susan, Susan, take it. I cannot understand it. I cannot read more. O Susan, what has the girl done ? ’

And she turned aside her chair, and began to cry stealthily ; she was not a strong-nerved woman ; and she had gathered but a vague impression that something terrible and irrevocable had occurred.

Susan was alarmed, no doubt, but she had plenty of self-command. She took the letter, and proceeded, as swiftly as she could, to get at the contents of it. Then she looked up, in a frightened way, at the parson, as if to judge in her own mind as to how far he should be trusted in this matter. And then she turned to the letter again—in a kind of despair.

‘ Mother,’ said she, at last, ‘ I understand no more than yourself what should be done. To think that all this should have been going on, and we knowing naught of it ! But you see what my father wants ; that is the first thing. Who is to go to Judith ? ’

At the mere mention of Judith's name a flash of dismay went to Prudence's heart. She knew that something must have happened ; she at once bethought her of Judith's interviews with the person in hiding ; and she was conscious of her own guilty connivance and secrecy ; so that the blood rushed to her face, and she sat there dreading to know what was coming.

‘Mother,’ Susan said again, and rather breathlessly, ‘do you not think, in such a pass, we might beg Master Blaise to give us of his advice ? The Doctor being from home, who else is there ?’

‘Nay, if I can be of any service to you or yours, good Mistress Hall, I pray you have no scruple in commanding me,’ said the parson—with his clear and keen gray eyes calmly waiting for information.

Judith's mother was understood to give her consent, and then Susan (after a moment's painful hesitation) took up the letter.

‘Indeed, good sir,’ said she, with an embarrassment that she rarely showed, ‘you will see there is reason for our perplexity,

and—and—I pray you be not too prompt to think ill of my sister. Perchance there may be explanations—or the story wrongly reported—in good truth, sir, my father writes in no such passion of anger as might be expected in such a pass, though 'tis but natural he should be sorely troubled and vexed——'

Again she hesitated—being somewhat unnerved and bewildered by what she had just been reading. She was trying to recall things, to measure possibilities, to overcome her amazement—all at once. And then she knew that the parson was coolly regarding her, and she strove to collect her wits.

'This, good sir, is the manner of it,' said she, in as calm a way as she could assume, 'that my father and his associates have but recently made a discovery that concerns them much, and is even a disaster to them; 'tis no less than that a copy of my father's last written play—the very one, indeed, that he finished ere leaving Stratford—hath lately been sold, they scarce know by whom as yet, to a certain bookseller in London; and that the bookseller is either about to print it and

sell it, or threatens to do so. They all of them, my father says, are grievously annoyed by this, for that the publishing of the play will satisfy many who will read it at home instead of coming to the theatre, and that thus the interests of himself and his associates will suffer gravely. I am sorry, good sir, to trouble you with such matters,' she added, with a glance of apology, 'but they come more near home to us than you might think.'

'I have offered to you my service in all things—that befit my office,' said Master Walter; but with a certain reserve, as if he did not quite like the course that matters were taking.

'And then,' continued Susan, glancing at the writing before her, 'my father says that they were much perplexed (having no right at law to stop such a publication); and made inquiries as to how any such copy could have found its way into the bookseller's hands; whereupon he discovered that which hath grieved him far more than the trouble about the play. Prudence, you are her nearest gossip; it cannot be true!' she exclaimed, and she turned to the young maiden, whose

face was no longer pale and thoughtful, but rose-coloured with shame and alarm.

‘For he says ’tis a story that is now everywhere abroad in London—and a laugh and a jest at the taverns—how that one Jack Orridge came down to Warwickshire, and made believe to be a wizard, and cozened Judith—Judith, Prudence, our Judith!—heard ye ever the like?—into a secret love affair; and that she gave him a copy of the play as one of her favours——’

‘Truly, now, that is false on the face of it,’ said Master Blaise, appositely. ‘That is a tale told by some one who knows not that Judith hath no skill of writing.’

‘Oh, ’tis too bewildering!’ Susan said, as she turned again to the letter in a kind of despair. ‘But to have such a story going about London—about Judith—about my sister Judith—how can you wonder that my father should write in haste and in anger? That she should meet this young man day after day at a farmhouse near to Bidford, and in secret; and listen to his stories of the Court, believing him to be a worthy gentleman in misfortune! A worthy gentleman,

truly!—to come and make sport of a poor country maiden, and teach her to deceive her father and all of us—not one of us knowing—not one——’

‘Susan—Susan!’ Prudence cried, in an agony of grief, ‘’tis not as you think! ’Tis not as it is written there! I will confess the truth. I myself knew of the young man being in the neighbourhood, and how he came to be acquainted with Judith. And she never was at any farmhouse to meet him, that know I well, but—but—he was alone—and in trouble, he said—and she was sorry for him, and durst not speak to any one but me. Nay, I know if there be aught wrong, ’twas none of her doing, that I know; as to the copy of the play, I am ignorant—but ’twas none of her doing—Susan, you think too harshly, indeed you do!’

‘Sweetheart, I think not harshly,’ said the other, in a bewildered way. ‘I but tell thee the story as I find it.’

‘’Tis not true, then. On her part, at least, there was no whit of any secret love affair, as I know right well!’ said Prudence, with a vehemence near to tears.

‘I but tell thee the story as my father heard it. Poor wench, whatever wrong she may have done, I have no word against her,’ Judith’s sister said.

‘I pray you continue,’ interposed Master Blaise, with his eyes calmly fixed on the letter; he had scarcely uttered a word.

‘Oh, my father goes on to say that this Orridge—this person representing himself as familiar with the Court, and the great nobles, and the like—is none other than the illegitimate son of an Oxfordshire gentleman who became over well acquaint with the daughter of an innkeeper in Oxford town; that the father meant to bring up the lad, and did give him some smattering of education, but died; that ever since he hath been dependent on his grandmother, a widow, who still keeps the inn; and that he hath lived his life in London, in any sort of company he could impose upon by reason of his fine manners. These particulars, my father says, he hath had from Ben Jonson, that seems to know something of the young man, and maintains that he is not so much vicious or ill-disposed as reckless and idle, and that

he is as likely as not to end his days with a noose round his neck. This, writes my father, is all that he can learn ; and he would have us question Judith as to the truth of the story, and as to how the copy of the play was made, and whether 'twas this same Orridge that carried it to London. And all this he would have inquired into at once, for his associates and himself are in great straits because of the matter, and have urgent need to know as much as can be known. Then there is this further writing towards the end—"I cannot explain all to thee at this time, but 'tis so that we have no remedy against the rascal publisher. Even if they do not register at the Stationers' Company, they but offend the Company ; and the only punishment that might at the best befall them would be His Grace of Canterbury so far misliking the play as to cause it to be burnt—a punishment that would fall heavier on us, I take it, than on them ; and that is in no case to be anticipated."

'I cannot understand these matters, good sir,' Judith's mother said, drying her eyes. 'Tis my poor wench that I think of. I

know she meant no harm, whatever comes of it. And she is so gentle and so proud-spirited that a word of rebuke from her father will drive her out of her reason. That she should have fallen into such trouble, poor wench, poor wench!—and you, Prudence, that was ever her intimate, and seeing her in such a coil—that you should not have told us of it!’

Prudence sate silent under this reproach; she knew not how to defend herself—perhaps she did not care, for all her thoughts were about Judith.

‘Saw you ever the young man?’ Susan said, scarcely concealing her curiosity.

‘Nay, not I,’ was Prudence’s answer. ‘But your grandmother hath seen him, and that several times.’

‘My grandmother!’ she exclaimed.

‘For he used to call at the cottage,’ said Prudence, ‘and pass an hour or two—being in hiding, as he said, and glad to have a little company. And he greatly pleased the old dame, as I have heard, because of his gracious courtesy and good breeding; and when they believed him to be in sad trouble,

and pitied him, who would be the first to speak and denounce a stranger so helpless? Nay, I know that I have erred. Had I had more courage I should have come to you, Susan, and begged you to draw Judith away from any further communication with the young man; but—I—I know not how it came about—she hath such a winning and over-persuading way, and is herself so fearless.'

'A handsome youth, perchance?' said Susan, who seemed to wish to know more about this escapade of her sister's.

'Right handsome, as I have heard; and of great courtesy and gentle manners,' Prudence answered. 'But well I know what it was that led Judith to hold communication with him after she would fain have had that broken off.' And then Prudence, with such detail as was within her knowledge, explained how Judith had come to think that the young stranger talked over much of Ben Jonson, and was anxious to show that her father could write as well as he (or better, as she considered). And then came the story of the lending of the sheets of the

play; and Prudence had to confess how that she had been Judith's accomplice on many a former occasion in purloining and studying the treasures laid by in the summer-house. She told all that she knew, openly and simply and frankly; and if she was in distress, it was with no thought of herself; it was in thinking of her dear friend and companion away over there at Shottery, who was all in ignorance of what was about to befall her.

Then the three women, being somewhat recovered from their first dismay, but still helpless and bewildered, and not knowing what to do, turned to the parson. He had sate calm and collected, silent for the most part, and reading in between the lines of the story his own interpretation. Perhaps, also, he had been considering other possibilities?—as to the chances that such an occasion offered for gathering back to the fold an errant lamb?

‘What your father wants done, that is the first thing, sweetheart,’ Judith's mother said, in a tremulous and dazed kind of fashion. ‘As to the poor wench, we will see about her

afterwards. And not a harsh word will I send her; she will have punishment enough to bear—poor lass, poor lass! So heedless and so headstrong she hath been always, but always the quickest to suffer if a word were spoken to her; and now if this story be put about, how will she hold up her head—she that was so proud? But what your father wants done, Susan, that is the first thing—that is the first thing—see what you can do to answer the letter as he wishes—you are quicker to understand such things than I.'

And then the parson spoke, in his clear, incisive, and authoritative way.

'Good madam, 'tis little I know of these matters in London; but if you would have Judith questioned—and that might be somewhat painful to any one of her relatives—I will go and see her for you, if you think fit. If she have been the victim of knavish designs, 'twill be easy for her to acquit herself; carelessness, perchance, may be the only charge to be brought against her. And as I gather from Prudence that the sheets of manuscript lent to the young man were in his possession for a certain time, I make no

doubt that the copy—if it came from this neighbourhood at all—was made by himself on those occasions, and that she had no hand in the mischief save in over-trusting a stranger. Doubtless your husband, good madam, is desirous of having clear and accurate statements on these and other points; whereas, if you, or Mistress Hall, or even Prudence there, were to go and see Judith, natural affection and sympathy might blunt the edge of your inquiries. You would be so anxious to excuse (and who would not, in your place?) that the very information asked for by your husband would be lost sight of. Therefore I am willing to do as you think fitting. I may not say that my office lends any special sanction to such a duty, for this is but a worldly matter; but friendship hath its obligations, and if I can be of service to you, good Mistress Shakespeare, 'tis far from repaying what I owe of godly society and companionship to you and yours. These be rather affairs for men to deal with than for women, who know less of the ways of the world; and I take it that Judith, when she is made aware of her

father's wishes, will have no hesitation in meeting me with frankness and sincerity.'

It was this faculty of his of speaking clearly and well and to the point that in a large measure gave him such an ascendancy over those women ; he seemed always to see a straight path before him, to have confidence in himself, and a courage to lead the way.

'Good sir, if you would have so much kindness!' Judith's mother said. 'Truly, you offer us help and guidance in a dire necessity. And if you will tell her what it is her father wishes to know, be sure that will be enough ; the wench will answer you, have no fear, good sir.'

Then Susan said, when he was about to go—

'Worthy sir, you need not say to her all that you have heard concerning the young man. I would liefer know what she herself thought of him, and how they came together, and how he grew to be on such friendly terms with her. For hitherto she hath been so sparing of her favour, though many have wished her to change her name

for theirs ; but always the wench hath kept roving eyes. Handsome was he, Prudence ? And of gentle manners, said you ? Nay, I warrant me 'twas something far from the common that led Judith such a dance.'

But Prudence, when he was leaving, stole out after him ; and when he was at the door, she put her hand on his arm. He turned and saw that the tears were running down her face.

'Be kind to Judith,' she said, not heeding that he saw her tears, and still clinging to his arm ; 'be kind to Judith, from my heart I beg it of you !—I pray you be kind and gentle with her, good Master Blaise ; for indeed she is like an own sister to me !'

CHAPTER IV.

RENEWALS.

As yet she was all unconscious ; and indeed the dulness following her father's departure was for her considerably lightened by this visit to her grandmother's cottage, where she found a hundred duties and occupations awaiting her. She was an expert needlewoman, and there were many arrears in that direction to be made up ; she managed the cooking, and introduced one or two cunning dishes, to the wonder of the little Cicely ; she even tried her hand at carpentering, where a shelf or the frame of a casement had got loose ; and as a reward she was occasionally invited to assist her grandmother in the garden. The old dame herself grew wonderfully amiable and cheerful in the constant association with this bright young life ; and she had a great store of ballads with which to beguile the tedium

of sewing ; though, in truth, these were for the most part of a monotonous and mournful character, generally reciting the woes of some poor maiden in Oxfordshire or Lincolnshire who had been deceived by a false lover, and yet was willing to forgive him even as she lay on her death-bed. As for Judith, she took to this quiet life quite naturally and happily ; and if she chanced to have time for a stroll along the wooded lanes or through the meadows, she was now right glad that there was no longer any fear of her being confronted by Master Leofric Hope—or Jack Orridge, as he had called himself. Of course she thought of him often, and of his courteous manners, and his eloquent and yet modest eyes ; and she hoped all was going well with him, and that she might perchance hear of him through her father. Nor could she forget (for she was but human) that the young man, when disguised as a wizard, had said that he had heard her named as the ' fairest maid in Warwickshire ; and subsequently, in his natural character, that he had heard Ben Jonson speak well of her looks ; and she hoped that, if ever he recalled these brief

interviews, he would consider that she had maintained a sufficiency of maidenly dignity, and had not betrayed the ignorance or awkwardness of a farm-bred wench. Nay, there were certain words of his that she put some store by—as coming from a stranger. For the rest, she was in no case likely to under-value her appearance ; her father had praised her hair, and that was enough.

One morning she had gone down to the little front gate, for some mischievous boys had lifted it off its hinges, and she wanted to get it back again on the rusty iron spikes. But it had got jammed somehow, and would not move ; and, in her pulling, some splinter of the wood ran into her hand, causing not a little pain. Just at this moment—whether he had come round that way on the chance of catching a glimpse of her, it is hard to say—Tom Quiney came by, but on the other side of the road, and clearly with no intention of calling at the cottage.

‘ Good-morrow, Judith,’ said he, in a kind of uncertain way ; and would have gone on.

Well, she was vexed and impatient with her fruitless efforts, and her hand smarted

not a little, so she looked at him and said, half-angrily—

‘I wish you would come and lift this gate.’

It was but a trifling task for the tall and straight-limbed young fellow who now strode across the highway. He jerked it up in a second, and then set it down again on the iron spikes, where it swung in its wonted way.

‘But your hand is bleeding, Judith!’ he exclaimed.

‘‘Tis nothing,’ she said. ‘It was a splinter. I have pulled it out.’

But he snatched her hand, peremptorily, before she could draw it away, and held it firmly, and examined it.

‘Why, there’s a bit still there—I can see it.’

‘I can get it out for myself,’ said she.

‘No, you cannot,’ he answered. ‘‘Tis far easier for some one else. Stay here a second, and I will fetch out a needle.’

He went into the cottage, and presently reappeared, not only with a needle, but also with a tin vessel holding water, and a bit of

linen and a piece of thread. Then he took Judith's soft hand as gently as he could in his muscular fingers ; and began to probe for the small fragment of wood just visible there. He seemed a long time about it ; perhaps he was afraid of giving her pain.

‘Do I hurt you, Judith?’ he said.

‘No,’ she answered, with some colour of embarrassment in her face. ‘Be quick.’

‘But I must be cautious,’ said he. ‘I would it were my own hand ; I would make short work of it.’

‘Let me try myself,’ said she, attempting to get away her hand from his grasp.

But he would not allow that, and in due time he managed to get the splinter out. Then he dipped his fingers in the water, and bathed the small wound in that way ; and then he must needs wrap the piece of linen round her hand—very carefully, so that there should be no crease—and thereafter fasten the bandage with the bit of thread. He did not look like one who could perform a surgical operation with exceeding delicacy ; but he was as gentle as he could ; and she thanked him—in an unwilling kind of way.

Then all at once her face brightened.

‘Why,’ said she, ‘I hear that you gave my father a riding-whip on his going.’

‘Did you not see it, Judith?’ he said, with some disappointment. ‘I meant you to have seen it. The handle was of ivory, and of a rare carving.’

‘I was not at the door when they went away—I met my father as they passed along the road,’ said she. ‘But I shall see it, doubtless, when he comes home again. And what said he? Was he pleased? He thanked you right heartily, did he not?’

‘Yes, truly; but ’twas a trifling matter.’

‘My father thinks more of the intention than of the value of such a gift,’ said she, ‘as I would.’

It was an innocent and careless speech; but it seemed to suddenly inspire him with a kind of wild wish.

‘Ah,’ said he, regarding her, ‘if you, Judith, now, would but take some little gift from me—no matter what—that would be a day I should remember all my life.’

‘Will you not come into the house?’ said

she, quickly. 'My grandam will be right glad to see you.'

She would have led the way; but he hesitated.

'Nay, I will not trouble your grandmother, Judith,' said he. 'I doubt not but that she hath had enough of visitors since you came to stay with her.'

'Since I came?' she said, good-naturedly—for she refused to accept the innuendo. 'Why, let me consider now. The day before yesterday my mother walked over, to see how we did; and before that—I think the day before that—Mistress Wyse came in to tell us that they had taken a witch at Abbots Morton; and then yesterday Farmer Bowstead called to ask if his strayed horse had been seen anywhere about these lanes. There now, three visitors since I have come to the cottage: 'tis not a multitude?'

'There has been none other?' said he, looking at her with some surprise.

'Not another foot has crossed the threshold to my knowledge,' said she, simply, and as if it were a matter of small concern.

But this intelligence seemed to produce

a very sudden and marked alteration in his manner. Not only would he accompany her into the house, but he immediately became most solicitous about her hand.

‘I pray you be careful, Judith,’ said he, almost as if he would again take hold of her wrist.

‘‘Tis but a scratch,’ she said.

‘Nay, now, if there be but a touch of rust, it might work mischief,’ said he, anxiously. ‘I pray you be careful; and I would bathe it frequently, and keep on the bandage until you are sure that all is well. Nay, I tell you this, Judith; there are more than you think of that would liefer lose a finger than that you should have the smallest hurt.’

And indoors, moreover, he was most amiable and gentle and anxious to please; and bore some rather sharp sayings of the old dame with great good-nature; and whatever Judith said, or suggested, or approved of—that was right, once and for all. She wished to hear more of the riding-whip also. Where was the handle carved? Had her father expressed any desire for such ornamentation?

‘Truly ’twas but a small return for his kindness to us the other day,’ said the young man, who was half-bewildered with delight at finding Judith’s eyes once more regarding him in the old, frank, and friendly fashion, and was desperately anxious that they should continue so to regard him (with no chilling shadow of the parson intervening). ‘For Cornelius Greene being minded to make one or two more catches,’ he continued—and still addressing those eyes that were at once so gentle and so clear and so kind—‘he would have me go to your father and beg him to give us words for these, out of any books he might know of. Not that we thought of asking him to write the words himself—far from that—but to choose them for us; and right willingly he did so. In truth, I have them with me,’ he added, searching for and producing a paper with some written lines on it. ‘Shall I read them to you, Judith?’

He did not notice the slight touch of indifference with which she assented; for when once she had heard that these compositions (whatever they might be) were not of her father’s writing, she was not anxious

to become acquainted with them. But his concern, on the other hand, was to keep her interested and amused and friendly; and Cornelius Greene and his doings were at least something to talk about.

‘The first one we think of calling “Fortune’s Wheel,”’ said he; ‘and thus it goes:

*“Trust not too much, if prosperous times do smile;
Nor yet despair of rising, if thou fall:
The Fatal Lady mingleth one with th’ other,
And lets not fortune stay, but round turns all.”*

And the other one—I know not how to call it yet—but Cornelius takes it to be the better of the two for his purpose; thus it is:

*“Merrily sang the Ely monks
When rowed thereby Canute the King.
‘Row near, my Knights, row near the land,
That we may hear the good monks sing.’”*

See you now how well it will go, Judith—*Merrily sang—merrily sang—the Ely monks—the Ely monks—when rowed thereby—CANUTE THE KING!*’ said he, in a manner suggesting the air. ‘’Twill go excellent well for four voices; and Cornelius is already begun—in truth, ’twill be something new at our merry-meetings——’

‘Ay, and what have you to say of your business, good Master Quiney?’ the old dame interrupted, sharply. ‘Be you so busy with your tavern-catches and your merry-makings that you have no thought of that?’

‘Indeed, I have enough regard for that, Mistress Hathaway,’ said he, in perfect good humour; ‘and it goes forward safely enough. But methinks you remind me that I have tarried here as long as I ought; so now I will get me back to the town.’

He half expected that Judith would go to the door with him; and when she had gone so far, he said—

‘Will you not come a brief way across the meadows, Judith?—’tis not well you should always be shut up in the cottage—you that are so fond of out-of-doors.’

He had no cause for believing that she was too much within-doors; but she did not stay to raise the question; she good-naturedly went down the little garden-path with him, and across the road, and so into the fields. She had been busy at work all the morning: twenty minutes’ idleness would do no harm.

Then, when they were quite by themselves, he said, seriously—

‘I pray you, take heed, Judith, that you let not the blood flow too much to your hand, lest it inflame the wound, however slight you may deem it. See now, if you would but hold it so, ’twould rest on mine, and be a relief to you.’

He did not ask her to take his arm, but merely that she should rest her hand on his ; and this seemed to her easy to do, and natural (so long as he was not tired). But also it seemed very much like the time when they used to go through those very meadows as boy and girl together, the tips of their fingers intertwined ; and so she spoke in a gentle and friendly kind of fashion to him.

‘And how is it with your business, in good sooth?’ she asked. ‘I hope there be no more of these junketings, and dancings, and brawls.’

‘Dear Judith,’ said he, ‘I know not who carries such tales of me to you. If you knew but the truth, I am never in a brawl of mine own making or seeking ; but one must hold one’s own, and the more that is done the

less are any likely to interfere. Nay,' he continued, with a modest laugh, 'I think I am safe for quiet now with any in Warwickshire; 'tis only a strange lad now and again that may come among us, and seek cause of quarrel; and surely 'tis better to have it over and done with, and either he or we to know our place? I seek no fighting for the love of it, my life on that; but you would not have any stranger come into Stratford a-swaggering, and biting his thumb at us, and calling us rogues of fiddlers?'

'Mercy on us, then,' she cried, 'are you champion for the town—or perchance for all of Warwickshire? A goodly life to look forward to! And what give they their watch-dog? Truly they must reward him that keeps such guard and will do battle for them all?'

'Nay, I am none such, Judith,' said he; 'I but take my chance like the others.'

He shifted her hand on his that it might rest the more securely—and his touch was gentle.

'And your merchandise—pray you who is so kind as to look after that when you are engaged in those pastimes?' she asked.

‘I have no fault to find with my merchandise, Judith,’ said he. ‘That I look after myself. I would I had more inducement to attend to it and to provide for the future. But it goes well, indeed it does.’

‘And Daniel Hutt?’

‘He has left the country now.’

‘And his vagabond crew; have they all made their fortunes?’

‘Why, Judith, they cannot have reached America yet,’ said he.

‘I am glad that you have not gone,’ she remarked, simply.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘why should I strive to push my fortunes there more than here? To what end? There be none that I could serve either way.’

And then it seemed to him that this was an ungracious speech; and he was anxious to stand well with her, seeing that she was disposed to be friendly.

‘Judith,’ he said, suddenly, ‘surely you will not remain over at Shottery to-morrow, with all the merriment of the Fair going on in the town? Nay, but you must come over—I could fetch you at any hour that you

named, if it so pleased you. There is a famous juggler come into the town, as I hear, that can do the most rare and wonderful tricks, and hath a dog as cunning as himself; and you will hear the new ballads, to judge which you would have; and the peddlers would show you their stores. Now, in good sooth, Judith, may not I come for you?—why, all the others have some one to go about with them; and she will choose this or that posy or ribbon, and wear it for the jest of the day; but I have no one to walk through the crowd with me, and see the people, and hear the bargainings and the music. I pray you, Judith, let me come for you. It cannot be well for you always to live in such dulness as is over there at Shottery.'

'If I were to go to the Fair with you,' said she—and not unkindly, 'methinks the people would stare, would they not? We have not been such intimate friends of late.'

'You asked me not to go to America, Judith,' said he.

'Well, yes,' she admitted. 'Truly I did so. Why should you go away with those

desperate and broken men? Surely 'tis better you should stay among your own people.'

'I stayed because you bade me, Judith,' said he.

She flushed somewhat at this; but he was so eager not to embarrass or offend her that he instantly changed the subject.

'May I, then, Judith? If you would come but for an hour!' he pleaded, for he clearly wanted to show to everybody that Judith was under his escort at the Fair; and which of all the maidens (he asked himself) would compare beside her? 'Why, there is not one of them but hath his companion, to buy for her some brooch, or pretty coif, or the like——'

'Are they all so anxious to lighten their purses?' said she, laughing. 'Nay, but truly I may not leave my grandmother, lest the good dame should think that I was wearying of my stay with her. Pray you, get some other to go to the Fair with you—you have many friends, as I know, in the town——'

'Oh, do you think 'tis the Fair I care

about?' said he, quickly. 'Nay, now, Judith, I would as lief not go to the Fair at all—or but for a few minutes, if you will let me bring you over some trinket in the afternoon. Nay, a hundred times would I rather not go, if you would grant me such a favour—'tis the first I have asked of you for many a day.'

'Why,' she said with a smile, 'you must all of you be prospering in Stratford, since you are all so eager to cast abroad your money. The peddlers will do a rare trade to-morrow, as I reckon.'

This was almost a tacit permission; and he was no such fool as to press for more. Already his mind ran riot—he saw himself ransacking all the packs and stalls in the town.

'And now,' she said, as she had come within sight of the houses, 'I will return now, or the good dame will wonder.'

'But I will walk back with you, Judith,' said he, promptly.

She looked at him—with those pretty eyes of hers clearly laughing.

'Methought you came away from the cottage,' said she, 'because of the claims of your

business ; and now you would walk all the way back again ?’

‘Your hand, Judith,’ said he, shamefacedly, ‘—you must not let it hang down by your side.’

‘Nay, for such a dangerous wound,’ said she, with her eyes gravely regarding him, ‘I will take precautions ; but cannot I hold it up myself—so—if need were ?’

He was so well satisfied with what he had gained that he would yield to her now as she wished. And yet he took her hand once more—gently and timidly—and as if unwilling to give up his charge of it.

‘I hope it will not pain you, Judith,’ he said.

‘I trust it may not lead me to death’s door,’ she answered, seriously ; and if her eyes were laughing it was with no unkindness.

And then they said good-bye to each other ; and she walked away back to Shottery, well content to have made friends with him again, and to have found him for the time being quit of his dark suspicions and jealousies of her ; while as for him, he went on to the town in a sort of foreknowledge

that all Stratford Fair would not have anything worthy to be offered to Judith; and wondering whether he could not elsewhere, and at once, and by any desperate effort, procure something fine and rare and beautiful enough to be placed in that poor wounded hand.

CHAPTER V.

‘THE ROSE IS FROM MY GARDEN GONE.’

Now when Parson Blaise set forth upon the mission that had been entrusted to him there was not a trace of anger or indignation in his mind. He was not even moved by jealous wrath against the person with whom Judith had been holding these clandestine communications; nor had he any sense of having been himself injured by her conduct. For one thing, he knew enough of Judith's pride and self-reliance to be fairly well satisfied that she was not likely to have compromised herself in any serious way; and for another, his own choice of her, from among the Stratford maidens, as the one he wished to secure for helpmate, was the result not so much of any overmastering passion as of a cool and discriminating judgment. Nay, this very complication that had arisen—might he not use

it to his own advantage? Might it not prove an argument more powerful than any he had hitherto tried? And so it was that he set out, not as one armed to punish, but with the most placable intentions; and the better to give the subject full consideration, he did not go straight across the meadows to the cottage, but went through the town, and away out the Alcester road, before turning round and making for Shottery.

Nor did it occur to him that he was approaching this matter with any mean or selfish ends in view. Far from that. The man was quite honest. In winning Judith over to be his wife, by any means whatever, was he not adding one more to the number of the Lord's people? Was he not saving her from her own undisciplined and wayward impulses, and from all the mischief that might arise from these? What was for his good was for her good, and the good of the Church also. She had a winning way; she was friends with many who rather kept aloof from the more austere of their neighbours; she would be a useful go-between. Her cheerfulness, her good temper, nay, her

comely presence and bright ways—all these would be profitably employed. Nor did he forget the probability of a handsome marriage-portion; and the added domestic comfort and serenity that that would bring himself. Even the marriage-portion (which he had no doubt would be a substantial one) might be regarded as coming into the Church in a way; and so all would work together for good.

When he reached the cottage he found the old dame in the garden, busy with her flowers and vegetables, and was told that Judith had just gone within-doors. Indeed, she had but that minute come back from her stroll across the fields with Quiney, and had gone in to fetch a jug so that she might have some fresh water from the well in the garden. He met her on the threshold.

'I would say a few words with you, Judith—and in private,' said he.

She seemed surprised, but was in no ill-humour; so she said, 'As you will, good sir,' and led the way into the main apartment, where she remained standing.

'I pray you be seated,' said he.

She was still more surprised; but she obeyed him—taking her seat under the window, so that her face was in shadow; while the light from the small panes fell full on him, sitting opposite her.

‘Judith,’ said he, ‘I am come upon a serious errand; and yet would not alarm you unnecessarily. Nay, I think that when all is done, good may spring out of the present troubles——’

‘What is it?’ she said, quickly. ‘Is any one ill—my mother?——’

‘No, Judith,’ he said. ‘’Tis no trial of that kind you are called to face. The Lord hath been merciful to you and yours these several years; while others have borne the heavy hand of affliction and lost their dearest at untimely seasons, you have been spared for many years now all but such trials as come in the natural course: would I could see you as thankful as you ought to be to the Giver of all good. And yet I know not but that grief over such afflictions is easier to bear than grief over the consequences of our own wrong-doing; memory preserves this last the longer; sorrow is not so enduring,

nor cuts so deep, as remorse. And then to think that others have been made to suffer through our evil-doing—that is an added sting: when those who have expected naught but filial obedience and duty—and the confidence that should exist between children and their parents——'

But this phrase about filial obedience had struck her with a sudden fear.

'I pray you what is it, sir? What have I done?' she said, almost in a cry.

Then he saw that he had gone too fast and too far.

'Nay, Judith,' he said, 'be not over alarmed. 'Tis perchance but carelessness and a disposition to trust yourself in all circumstances to your own guidance that have to be laid to your charge. I hope it may be so; I hope matters may be no worse; 'tis for yourself to say. I come from your mother and sister, Judith,' he continued in measured tones. 'I may tell you at once that they have learned of your having been in secret communication with a stranger who has been in these parts; and they would know the truth. I will not seek to judge you before-

hand, nor point out to you what perils and mischances must ever befall you, so long as you are bent on going your own way, without government or counsel: that you must now perceive for yourself—and I trust the lesson will not be brought home to you too grievously.'

'Is that all?' Judith had said quickly to herself, and with much relief.

'Good sir,' she said to him, coolly, 'I hope my good mother and Susan are in no bewilderment of terror. 'Tis true, indeed, that there was one in this neighbourhood whom I met and spoke with on several occasions; if there was secrecy, 'twas because the poor young gentleman was in hiding; he dared not even present the letter that he brought commending him to my father. Nay, good Master Blaise, I pray you comfort my mother and sister, and assure them there was no harm thought of by the poor young man.'

'I know not that, Judith,' said he, with his clear, observant eyes trying to read her face in the dusk. 'But your mother and sister would fain know what manner of man he

was, and what you know of him, and how he came to be here.'

Then the fancy flashed across her mind that this intervention of his was but the prompting of his own jealousy, and that he was acting as the spokesman of her mother and sister chiefly to get information for himself.

'Why, sir,' said she, lightly, 'I think you might as well ask these questions of my grandmother, that knoweth about as much as I do concerning the young man, and was as sorry as I for his ill fortunes.'

'I pray you take not this matter so heedlessly, Judith,' he said, with some coldness. 'Tis of greater moment than you think. No idle curiosity has brought me hither to-day; nay, it is with the authority of your family that I put these questions to you; and I am charged to ask you to answer them with all of such knowledge as you may have.'

'Well, well,' said she, good-naturedly; 'his name——'

She was about to say that his name was Leofric Hope; but she checked herself, and

some colour rose to her face — though he could not see that.

‘His name, good sir, as I believe, is John Orridge,’ she continued, but with no embarrassment; indeed, she did not think that she had anything very serious either to conceal or to confess; ‘and I fear me the young man is grievously in debt, or otherwise forced to keep away from those that would imprison him; and being come to Warwickshire, he brought a letter to my father, but was afraid to present it. He hath been to the cottage here certain times, for my grandmother, as well as I, was pleased to hear of the doings in London; and right civil he was, and well-mannered; and ’twas news to us to hear about the theatres and my father’s way of living there. But why should my mother and Susan seek to know aught of him?—surely Prudence hath not betrayed the trust I put in her?—for indeed the young man was anxious that his being in the neighbourhood should not be known to any in Stratford. However, as he is now gone away, and that some weeks ago, ’tis of little moment, as I reckon; and if ever he come back

here I doubt not but that he will present himself at New Place, that they may judge of him as they please. That he can speak for himself, and to advantage and goodly showing, I know right well.'

'And that is all you can say of this man, Judith,' said he, with some severity in his tone, '--with this man that you have been thus familiar with?'

'Marry is it!' she said, lightly. 'But I have had guesses, no doubt; for first I thought him a gentleman of the Court, he being apparently acquainted with all the doings there; and then methought he was nearer to the theatres, from his knowledge of the players. But you would not have had me ask the young man as to his occupation and standing, good sir? 'Twould have been unseemly in a stranger, would it not? Could I dare venture on questions, he being all unknown to any of us?'

And now a suspicion flashed upon him that she was merely befooling him; so he came at once and sharply to the point.

'Judith,' said he, endeavouring to pierce with his keen eyes the dusk that enshrouded

her, 'you have not told me all. How came he to have a play of your father's in his possession?'

'Now,' said she, with a quick anger, 'that is ill done of Prudence! No one but Prudence knew; and for so harmless a secret—and that all over and gone, moreover—and the young man himself away I know not where—nay, by my life, I had not thought that Prudence would serve me so. And to what end? Why, good sir, I myself lent the young man the sheets of my father's writing—they were the sheets that were thrown aside—and I got each and all of them safely back, and replaced them. Prudence knew what led me to lend him my father's play; and where was the harm of it? I thought not that she would go and make trouble out of so small a thing.'

By this time the good parson had come to see pretty clearly how matters stood—what with Prudence's explanations and Judith's present confessions. And he made no doubt that this stranger—whether from idleness, or for amusement, or with some more sinister purpose, he had no means of

knowing—had copied the play when he had taken the sheets home with him to the farm ; while as to the appearance in London of the copy so taken, it was sufficiently obvious that Judith was in complete ignorance, and could afford no information whatever. So that now the first part of his mission was accomplished. He asked her a few more questions, and easily discovered that she knew nothing whatever about the young man's position in life, or whether he had gone straight from the farm to London, or whether he was in London now. As to his being in possession, or having been in possession, of a copy of her father's play, it was abundantly evident that she had never dreamed of any such thing.

And now he came to the more personal part of his mission ; that was for him much more serious.

'Judith,' said he, 'tis not like you should know what sad and grievous consequences may spring from errors apparently small. How should you ? You will take no heed or caution. The advice of those who would be nearest and dearest to you is of no

account with you. You will go your own way—as if one of your years and inexperience could know the pitfalls that lie in a young maiden's path. The whole of life is but a jest to you—a tale without meaning—something to pass the hour withal. And think you that such blindness and wilfulness brings no penalty? Nay, sooner or later the hour strikes; you look back and see what you have done;—and the offers of safe guidance that you have neglected or thrust aside.'

'I pray you, sir, what is it now?' she said, indifferently (and with a distinct wish that he would go away, and release her, and let her get out into the light again). 'Methought I had filled up the measure of my iniquities.'

'Thus it is—thus it will be always,' said he, with a kind of hopelessness, 'so long as you harden your heart, and have no thought but for the vanities of the moment.' And then he addressed her more pointedly. 'But even now methinks I can tell you what will startle you out of your moral sloth, which is an offence in the eyes of the Lord, as it is a cause for pity and almost despair to all who know you. It was a light matter, you think,

that you should hold this secret commerce with a stranger—careless of the respect due to your father's house, careless of the opinion and the anxious wishes of your friends, careless, even, of your good name——'

'My good name?' said she, quickly and sharply. 'I pray you, sir, have heed what you say.'

'Have heed to what I have to tell you, Judith,' said he, sternly. 'Ay, and take warning by it. Think you that I have pleasure in being a bearer of evil tidings?'

'But what now, sir? What now? Heaven's mercy on us, let us get to the end of the dreadful deeds I have done!' she exclaimed, with some anger and impatience.

'I would spare you, but may not,' said he, calmly. 'And now, what if I were to tell you that this young man whom you encouraged into secret conversation—whose manners seemed to have had so much charm for you—was a rascal thief and villain? How would your pride bear it if I told you that he had cozened you with some foolish semblance of a wizard?——'

‘Good sir, I know it,’ she retorted. ‘He himself told me as much.’

‘Perchance. Perchance ’twas part of his courteous manners to tell you as much!’ was the scornful rejoinder. ‘But he did not tell you all?—he did not tell you that he had copied out every one of those sheets of your father’s writing; that he was about to carry that stolen copy to London, like the knave and thief that he was; that he was to offer it for money to the booksellers? He did not tell you that soon your father and his associates in the theatre would be astounded by learning that a copy of the new play had been obtained in some dark fashion and sold; that it was out of their power to recover it; that their interests would be seriously affected by this vile conspiracy; or that they would by and by discover that this purloined play which was like to cause them so much grievous loss and vexation of mind had been obtained here—in this very neighbourhood—and by the aid of no other than your father’s daughter.’

‘Who—told—you—this?’ she asked in a strange, stunned way: her eyes were terror-stricken—her hands all trembling.

'A good authority,' said he. 'Your father. A letter is but now come from London.'

She uttered a low, shuddering cry ; it was a moan almost.

'See you now,' said he (for he knew that all her bravery was struck down, and she entirely at his mercy), 'what must ever come of your wilfulness and your scorn of those who would aid and guide you? Loving counsel and protection are offered you—the natural shield of a woman; but you must needs go your own way alone. And to what ends? Think you that this is all? Not so. For the woman who makes to herself her own rule of conduct must be prepared for calumnious tongues. And bethink you what your father must have thought—of you—the only daughter of his household now—when he learned the story of this young man coming into Warwickshire, and befooling you with his wizard's tricks, and meeting you secretly, and cozening you of the sheets of your father's play. These deeds that are done in the dark soon reach to daylight; and can you wonder, when your father found

your name abroad in London—the heroine of a common jest—a byword—that his vexation and anger should overmaster him? What marvel that he should forthwith send to Stratford, demanding to know what further could be learned of the matter—perchance fondly trusting, who knows, to find that rumour had lied? But there is no such hope for him—nor for you. What must your mother say in reply? What excuse can she offer? Or how make reparation to those associates of your father who suffer with him? And how get back your good name—that is being bandied about the town as the heroine of a foolish jest? Your father may regain possession of his property—I know not whether that be possible or no—but can he withdraw the name of his daughter from the ribald wit of the taverns? And I know which he valueth the more highly, if his own daughter know it not.’

He had struck hard; he knew not how hard.

‘My father wrote thus?’ she said; and her head was bent, and her hands covering her face.

'I read the letter no more than an hour ago,' said he. 'Your mother and sister would have me come over to see whether such a story could be true ; but Prudence had already admitted as much——'

'And my father is angered,' she said—in that low strange voice.

'Can you wonder at it ?' he said.

Again there came an almost inarticulate moan—like that of an animal stricken to death.

As for him, he had now the opportunity of pouring forth the discourse to her that he had in a measure prepared as he came along the highway. He knew right well that she would be sorely wounded by this terrible disclosure ; that the proud spirit would be in the dust ; that she would be in a very bewilderment of grief. And he thought that now she might consent to gentle leading, and would trust herself to the only one (himself, to wit) capable of guiding her through her sorrows ; and he had many texts and illustrations apposite. She heard not one word. She was as motionless as one dead ; and the vision that rose before her burning brain was the face of her father as she had seen it—for a moment

—in the garden, on the morning of his departure. That terrible swift look of anger towards old Matthew she had never forgotten—the sudden lowering of the brows, the flash in the eyes, the strange contraction of the mouth; and that was what she saw now—that was how he was regarding her—and that, she knew, would be the look that would meet her always and always as she lay and thought of him in the long wakeful nights. She could not go to him. London was far away. She could not go to him, and throw herself at his feet, and beg and pray with outstretched and trembling hands for but one word of pity. The good parson had struck hard.

And yet in a kind of way he was trying to administer consolation—at all events, counsel. He was enlarging on the efficacy of prayer. And he said that if the Canaanitish woman of old had power to intercede for her daughter, and win succour for her, surely that would not be denied to such an one as Judith's mother, if she sought for her daughter strength and fortitude in trouble where alone these could be found.

'The Canaanitish woman,' said he, 'had but the one saving grace—but that an all-powerful one—of faith; and even when the disciples would have her sent away, she followed worshipping, and saying, "Lord, help me." And the Lord himself answered and said: "It is not good to take the children's bread, and to cast it to whelps." But she said, "Truth, Lord, yet indeed the whelps eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." Then our Lord answered and said, "O woman, great is thy faith: be it to thee as thou desirest." And her daughter was made whole at that hour.'

Judith started up—she had not heard a single word.

'I pray you, pardon me, good sir,' she said—for she was in a half-frantic state of misery and despair—'my—my grandmother will speak with you—I—I pray you pardon me——'

She got up into her own little chamber—she scarce knew how. She sat down on the bed. There were no tears in her eyes; but there was a terrible weight on her chest that seemed to stifle her; and she was

breathless, and could not think aright, and her trembling hands were clenched. Sometimes she wildly thought she wanted Prudence to come to her; and then a kind of shudder possessed her—and a wish to go away—she cared not where—and be seen no more. That crushing weight increased, choking her; she could not rest; she rose and went quickly down the stair and through the garden into the road.

‘Judith, wench!’ called her grandmother, who was talking to the parson.

She took no heed. She went blindly on; and all these familiar things seemed so different now. How could the children laugh so? She got into the Bidford road; she did not turn her eyes towards any whom she met, to see whether she knew them or no; there was enough within her own brain for her to think of. She made her way to the summit of Bardon Hill, and there she looked over the wide landscape; but it was towards London that she looked—and with a strange and trembling fear. And then she seemed anxious to hide away from being seen, and went down by hedge-rows and field-paths, and at last she

was by the river. She regarded it, flowing so stealthily by, in the sad and monotonous silence. Here was an easy means of slipping away from all this dread thing that seemed to surround her and overwhelm her—to glide away as noiselessly and peacefully as the river itself, to any unknown shore, she cared not what. And then she sate down, still looking vaguely and absently at the water, and began to think of all that had happened to her on the banks of this stream; and she looked at these visionary pictures and at herself in them as if they were apart and separated from her, and she never to be like that again. Was it possible that she ever could have been so careless and so happy—with no weight at all resting on her heart—but singing out of mere thoughtlessness, and teaching her cousin Willie the figures of dances, herself laughing the while? It seemed a long time ago now, and that he was cut off from her too, and all of them, and that there was to be no expiation for evermore for this that she had done.

How long she sate there she knew not. Everything was a blank to her but this crushing consciousness that what had happened

could never be recalled ; that her father and she were for ever separated now—and his face regarding her with the terrible look she had seen in the garden ; that all the happy past was cut away from her, and she an outcast and a byword and a disgrace to all that knew her. And then she thought, in the very weariness of her misery, that if she could only walk away anywhere—anywhere alone, so that no one should meet her or question her—until she was broken and exhausted with fatigue, she would then go back to her own small room and lie down on the bed and try if sleep would procure some brief spell of forgetfulness, some relief from her aching head and far heavier heart. But when she rose she found that she was trembling from weakness ; and a kind of shiver as of cold went through her, though the autumn day was warm enough. She walked slowly, and almost dragged herself, all the way home. Her hand shook so that she could scarce undo the latch of the gate. She heard her grandmother in the inner apartment ; but she managed to creep noiselessly upstairs into her own little chamber ; and there she sank

down on the bed, and lay in a kind of stupor, pressing her hands on her throbbing brow.

It was some two hours afterwards that her grandmother, who did not know that Judith had returned, was walking along the little passage and was startled by hearing a low moaning above—a kind of dull cry of pain, so slight that she had to listen again ere she could be sure that it was not mere fancy. Instantly she went up the few wooden steps and opened the door. Judith was lying on the bed, with all her things on, just as she had seen her go forth. And then—perhaps the noise of the opening of the door had wakened her—she started up, and looked at her grandmother in a wild and dazed kind of way, as if she had just shaken off some terrible dream.

'Oh, grandmother,' she said, springing to her and clinging to her like a child, 'it is not true—it is not true—it cannot be true!'

But then she fell to crying—crying as if her heart would break. The whole weight of her misery came back upon her, and the hopelessness of it, and her despair.

'Why, good lass,' said her grandmother, smoothing the sun-brown hair that was

buried in her bosom, and trying to calm the violence of the girl's sobbing, 'thou must not take on so. Thy father may be angered, 'tis true, but there will come brighter days for thee. Nay, take not on so, good lass!'

'Oh, grandmother, you cannot understand,' she said, and her whole frame was shaken with her sobs. 'You cannot understand. Grandmother, grandmother, there was—there was but the one rose—in my garden—and that is gone now.'

CHAPTER VI.

IN TIME OF NEED.

LATE that night, in the apartment below, Tom Quiney was seated by the big fireplace, staring moodily into the chips and logs that had been lit there—the evenings having grown somewhat chill now. There was a little parcel lying unopened and unheeded on the table. He had not had patience to wait for the Fair of the morrow; he had ridden all the way to Warwick to purchase something worthy of Judith's acceptance; and he had come over to the cottage in high hopes of her being still in that kindly mood—that reminded him of other days. Then came the good dame's story of what had befallen; and how that the parson had been over, bringing with him these terrible tidings; and how that since then Judith would not hear of any one being sent for, and would take no

food, but was now lying there, alone in the dark, moaning to herself at times. And the good dame—as this tall young fellow sate there listening to her, with his fists clenched, and the look on his face ever growing darker—went on to express her fear that the parson had been over hard with her grandchild; that probably he could not understand how her father had been the very idol of her life-long worship; that the one thing she was ever thinking of was how to win his approval, to be rewarded by even a nod of encouragement.

‘Nay, I liked not the manner of his speaking, when he wur come to me in the garden,’ the old dame continued. ‘I liked it not. He be sharp of tongue, the young pahrson; and there wur too much to my mind of discipline, and chastening of proud spirits and the like o’ that. To my mind he have not years enough to be placed in such authority.’

‘The Church is behind him,’ said this young fellow, almost to himself, and his eyes were burning darkly as he spoke. ‘I may not put hand on him. The Church is behind him. Marry, ’tis a goodly shelter for men that be of the woman kind.’

Then he looked up quickly, and his words were savage.

‘What think you, good grandmother—were one to seize him by neck and heel and break his back on the rail of Clopton’s bridge? Were it not well done?—by my life, I think it were well done!’

‘Nay, nay, now,’ said she, quickly, for she was somewhat alarmed, seeing his face set hard with passion and his eyes afire. ‘I would have no brawling. There be plenty of harm done already. Perchance the good pahrson hath not spoken so harshly after all. In good sooth, now, none but her own people can understand how the wench hath ever looked up to her father—for a word or a nod commending her, as I say—and when she be told now that she hath wrought mischief, and caused herself to be talked about, and her father vexed, and all the rest of the tale, why ’tis like to drive her out of her mind. And now this be all her cry—that she may see no one of her people any more; she would bide with me here; “Grandmother, grandmother,” she saith, “I will bide with you, if you will suffer me. I will show

myself in Stratford no more ; they shall have no shame through me." Nay, but the wench be half out of her senses, as I think ; and saith wild things—that she would go and sell herself to be a slave in the Indies, could she restore the money to her father or bring him back this that he hath lost. 'Tis a terrible plight for the poor wench ; and always she saith, "Grandmother, grandmother, let me bide with you ; I will never go back to New Place ; grandmother, I can work as well as any ; and you will let me bide with you." Poor lass—poor lass !

'But how came the parson to interfere ?' Quiney said, hotly. 'I'll be sworn Judith's father did not write to him. How came he to be preaching his discipline and chastisement ? How came he to be entrusted with the task of abusing her and crushing the too proud spirit ? By heavens, now, there may be occasion ere long to tame some one's proud spirit—but not the spirit of a defenceless young maid—marry, that is work fit only for parsons. Man to man is the better way—and it will come ere long.'

'Nay, softly, softly, good Master Quiney,'

said the old dame, in her gentlest tones. 'Would you mar all the good opinion that Judith hath of you? Why, to-day, now, just ere the parson came, I wur in the garden, putting things straight a bit, and as she came through, she says to me quite pleasant-like, "I have just been across the fields, grandmother, with Master Quiney"—or Tom Quiney, as she said, being friendly and pleasant-like—"and I hear less now of his quarrelling and fighting among the young men; and his business goeth on well; and to-morrow, grandmother, he is going to buy me something at the Fair."'

'Said she all that?' he asked, quickly—and with a flush of colour rushing to his face.

'Marry did she; and looked pleased, for 'tis a right friendly wench and good-natured withal,' the old dame said—glad to see that these words had for the moment scattered his wrath to the winds; and she went on for some little time talking to him in her garrulous easy fashion about Judith's frank and honest qualities, and her good-hearted ways, and the pretty daintinesses of her coaxing when she was so inclined. It was a story he

was not loth to listen to ; and yet it seemed so strange ; they were talking of her almost as of one passed away—as if the girl lying there in that darkened room, instead of torturing her brain with incessant and lightning-like visions of all the harm she had caused in London, were now far removed from all such troubles, and hushed in the calm of death.

He went to the table and opened the box, and took out the little present he had brought for Judith. It was a pair of lace cuffs, with a slender silver circle at the wrist ; the lace going back from that in a succession of widening leaves. It was not only a pretty present, it was also (in proportion to his means) a costly one—as the old dame's sharp eyes instantly saw.

‘ I think she would have been pleased with them,’ he said, absently.

And then he said—

‘ Good grandmother, it were of no use to lay them near her in the morning—on a chair or at the window—that perchance she might look at them ?’

‘ Nay, nay,’ the grandmother said, shaking her head, ‘ ’tis no child's trouble that hath

befallen the poor wench, that she can be comforted with pretty trifles.'

'I meant not that,' said he, flushing somewhat. 'Tis that I would have her know that—that there were friends thinking of her all the same—those that would rather have her gladdened and tended and made much of rather than—than—chidden with any chastisement.'

This word chastisement seemed to recall his anger.

'I say that Judith hath done no wrong at all,' he said, as if he were confronting some one not there; 'and that I will maintain; and let no man in my hearing say aught else. Why, now, the story as you tell it, good grandmother—'tis as plain as daylight—a child can see it—all that she did was done to magnify her father and his writing; and if the villain sold the play—or let it slip out of his hands—was that her doing? Doubtless it is a sore mischance; but I see not that Judith is to be blamed for it; and right well I know that if her father were to hear how she is smitten down with grief, he would be the first to say: "Good lass, there is no such

harm done. A greater harm would be your falling sick ; get you up and out ; seek your friends again ; and be happy as you were before." That is what he would say, I will take my oath of it ; and if the parson and his chastisements were to come across him, by my life I would not seek to be in the parson's shoes !'

'I must make another trial with the poor wench,' said the good grandmother, rising, 'that hath eaten nothing all the day. In truth her only cry is to be left alone now, and that hereafter I am to let her bide with me. It be a poor shelter, I think, for one used to live in a noble house ; but there 'tis, so long as she wisheth it.'

'Nay, but this cannot be suffered to go on, good Mistress Hathaway,' said he, as he rose and got his cap. 'For if Judith take no food, and will see no one, and be alone with her trouble, of a surety she will fall ill. Now to-morrow morning I will bring Prudence over. If any can comfort her, Prudence can ; and that she will be right willing I know. They have been as sisters.'

'That be well thought of, Master Quiney,'

said the grandmother, as she went to the door with him. 'Take care o' the ditch the other side of the way; it be main dark o' nights now.'

'Good-night to you, good grandmother,' said he, as he disappeared in the blackness.

But it was neither back home nor yet to Stratford town that Tom Quiney thought of going all that long night. He felt a kind of constraint upon him (and yet a constraint that kept his heart warm with a secret satisfaction) that he should play the part of watch-dog, as it were—as if Judith were sorely ill, or in danger, or in need of protection somehow; and he kept wandering about in the dark, never at any great radius from the cottage. His self-imposed task was the easier now that as the black clouds overhead slowly moved before the soft westerly wind, gaps were opened, and here and there clusters of stars were visible, shedding a faint light down on the sombre roads and fields and hedges. Many strange fancies occurred to him during that long and silent night, as to what he could do, or would like to do, for Judith's sake. Breaking the parson's neck

was the first and most natural and the most easily accomplished ; but fleeing the country, which he knew must follow, did not seem so desirable a thing. He wanted to do something—he knew not what. He wished he had been less of a companion with the young men, and less careful to show, with them, that Stratford town and the county of Warwick could hold their own against all comers. If he had been more considerate and gentle with Judith, perhaps she would not have sought the society of the parson ? He knew he had not the art of winning her over, like the parson. He could not speak so plausibly. Nor had he the authority of the Church behind him. It was natural for women to think much of that, and to be glad of the shelter of authority. Parsons themselves (he considered) were a kind of half-women, being in women's secrets, and entitled to speak to them in ghostly confidence. But if Judith now—if she wanted some one to do something for her—no matter what—in his rough and ready way—well, he wondered what that could be that he would refuse. And so the dark hours went by.

With the gray of the dawn he began to cast his eyes abroad—as if to see if any one was stirring, or approaching the cluster of cottages nestled down there among the trees. The daylight widened and spread up in the trembling east; the fields and the woods became clear; here and there a small tuft of blue smoke began to arise from a cottage chimney. And now he was on Bardon Hill, and could look abroad over the wide landscape lying between Shottery and Stratford town; and if any one—any one bringing lowering brows and further cruel speech to a poor maid already stricken down and defenceless—had been in sight, what then? Watchfully and slowly he went down from the hill, and back to the meadows lying between the hamlet and Stratford, there to interpose, as it were, and question all comers. And well it was, for the sake of peace and charity, that the good parson did not chance to be early abroad on this still morning; and well it was for the young man himself. There was no wise-eyed Athene to descend from the clouds and bid this wrathful Achilles calm his heart. He was only an English

country lad—though sufficiently Greek-like in form; and he was hungry and gray-faced with his vigil of the night, and not in a placable mood. Nay, when a young man is possessed with the consciousness that he is the defender of some one behind him—some one who is weak, and feminine, and suffering—he is apt to prove a dangerous antagonist; and it was well for all concerned that he had no occasion to pick a quarrel on this morning in these quiet meadows. In truth he might have been more at rest had he known that the good parson was in no hurry to follow up his monitions of the previous day; he wished these to sink into her mind and take root; so that thereafter might spring up such wholesome fruits as repentance, and humility, and the desire of godly aid and counsel.

By and by he slipped away home; plunged his head into cold water to banish the dreams of the night; and then, having swallowed a cup of milk to stay his hunger, he went along to Chapel Street, to see if he could have speech of Prudence. He found that not only were all of the household up and doing, but

that Prudence herself was ready to go out, being bent on one of her charitable errands. And it needed but a word to alter the direction of her kindness : of course she would at once go to see Judith.

‘ Truly I had fears of it,’ said she, as they went through the fields, her pale calm face having grown more and more anxious as she listened to all that he had to tell her. ‘ Her father was as the light of the world to her. With the others of us she hath ever been headstrong in a measure and careless—and yet so lovable withal and merry that I for one could never withstand her ; nay, I confess I tried not to withstand her, for never knew I of any wilfulness of hers springing from anything but good-nature and her kind and generous ways. But that she was ever ready to brave our opinions, I know ; and perchance make light of our anxieties, we not having her courage ; and in all things she seemed to be a guide unto herself, and to walk sure, and have no fear. In all things but one. Indeed ’tis true what her grandmother told you, and who should know better than I, who was always with her ? The

slightest wish of her father's—that was law to her. A word of commending from him—and she was happy for days. And think what this must be now—she that was so proud of his approval—that scarce thought of aught else. Nay, for myself I can see that they have told him all a wrong story in London, that know I well; and 'tis no wonder that he is vexed and angry; but Judith—poor Judith——'

She could say no more just then; she turned aside her face somewhat.

'Do you know what she said to her grandmother, Prudence, when she fell a-crying—that there had been but the one rose in her garden, and that was gone now.'

''Tis what Susan used to sing,' said Prudence, with rather trembling lips. '“The rose is from my garden gone,” 'twas called. Ay, and hath she that on her mind now? Truly I wish that her mother and Susan had let me break this news to her; none know as well as I what it must be to her.'

And here Tom Quiney quickly asked her whether it was not clear to her that the parson had gone beyond his mission alto-

gether ; and that in a way that would have to be dealt with afterwards, when all these things were amended ? Prudence, with some faint colour in her pale face, defended Master Blaise to the best of her power ; and said she knew he could not have been unduly harsh ; nay, had she not herself, just as he was setting forth, besought him to be kind and considerate with Judith ? Hereupon Quiney rather brusquely asked what the good man could mean by phrases about discipline and chastenings and chastisements ; to which Prudence answered gently that these were but separate words, and that she was sure Master Blaise had fulfilled what he undertook in a merciful spirit, which was his nature. After that there was a kind of silence between these two ; perhaps Quiney considered that no good end could be served at present by stating his own ideas on that subject. The proper time would come in due course.

At length they reached the cottage. But here, to their amazement, and to the infinite distress of Prudence, when Judith's grandmother came down the wooden steps again,

she shook her head, saying that the wench would see no one.

‘I thought as ’twould be so,’ she said.

‘But me, good grandmother! Me!’ Prudence cried, with tears in her eyes. ‘Surely she will not refuse to see me!’

‘No one, she saith,’ was the answer. ‘Poor wench, her head do ache so bad. And when one would cheer her or comfort her a morsel, ’tis another fit of crying—that will wear her to skin and bone, if she do not pluck up better heart. She hath eaten naught this morning neither; ’tis for no wilfulness, poor lass, for she tried an hour ago; and now ’tis best as I think to leave her alone.’

‘By your leave, good grandmother,’ said Prudence, with some firmness, ‘that will I not. If Judith be in such trouble, ’tis not likely that I should go away and leave her. It has never been the custom between us two.’

‘As you will, Prudence,’ the grandmother said. ‘Young hearts have their confidences among themselves. Perchance you may be able to rouse her.’

Prudence went up the stairs silently, and opened the door. Judith was lying on the bed—her face turned away from the light; her hands clasped over her forehead.

‘Judith!’

There was no answer.

‘Judith,’ said her friend, going near, ‘I am come to see you.’

There was a kind of sob—that was all.

‘Judith, is your head so bad? Can I do nothing for you?’

She put over her hand—the soft and cool and gentle touch of which had comforted many a sickbed—and she was startled to find that both Judith’s hands and forehead were burning hot.

‘No, sweetheart,’ was the answer, in a low and broken voice, ‘you can do nothing for me now.’

‘Nay, nay, Judith, take heart,’ Prudence said, and she gently removed the hot fingers from the burning forehead, and put her own cooler hand there, as if to dull the throbbing of the pain. ‘Sweetheart, be not so cast down! ’Twill be all put right in good time.’

‘Never—never,’ the girl said—without

tears, but with an abject hopelessness of tone. 'It can never be undone now. He said my name was become a mockery among my father's friends. For myself, I would not heed that—nay, they might say of me what they pleased—but that my father should hear of it—a mockery and scorn—and they think I cared so little for my father that I was ready to give away his papers to any one pretending to be a sweetheart and befooling me—and my father to know it all, and to hear such things said—no, that can never be undone now. I used to count the weeks and the days and the very hours when I knew he was coming back; that was the joy of my life to me; and now, if I were to know that he were coming near to Stratford I should fly, and hide somewhere—anywhere—in the river as lief as not. Nay, I make no complaint. 'Tis my own doing; and it cannot be undone now.'

'Judith, Judith, you break my heart!' her friend cried. 'Surely to all troubles there must come an end.'

'Yes, yes,' was the answer—in a low voice, and almost as if she were speaking to

herself. 'That is right. There will come an end. I would it were here now.'

All Prudence's talking seemed to be of no avail. She reasoned and besought—often-times with tears in her eyes; but Judith remained quite listless and hopeless; she seemed to be in a stunned and dazed condition after the long sleeplessness of the night; and Prudence was afraid that further entreaties would only aggravate her headache.

'I will go and get you something to eat now,' said she. 'Your grandmother says you have had nothing since yesterday.'

'Do not trouble; 'tis needless, sweetheart,' Judith said; and then she added, with a brief shiver: 'But if you could fetch a thick cloak, dear Prudence, and throw it over me—surely the day is cold somewhat.'

A few minutes after (so swift and eager was everybody in the house) Judith was warmly wrapped up; and by the side of the bed, on a chair, was some food the good grandmother had been keeping ready, and also a flask of wine that Quiney had brought with him.

‘Look you, Judith,’ said Prudence, ‘here is some wine that Thomas Quiney hath brought for you—’tis of a rare quality, he says—and you must take a little—nay, you must and shall, sweetheart; and then perchance you may be able to eat.’

She sipped a little of the wine—it was but to show her gratitude and send him her thanks. She could not touch the food. She seemed mostly anxious for rest and quiet; and so Prudence noiselessly left her, and stole down the stair again.

Prudence was terribly perplexed, and in a kind of despair almost.

‘I know not what to do,’ she said. ‘I would bring over her mother and Susan, but that she begs and prays me not to do that—nay, she cannot see them, she says. And there is no reasoning with her. It cannot be undone now—that is her constant cry. What to do I cannot tell. For surely, if she remain so, and take no comfort, she will fall ill.’

‘Ay, and if that be so, who is to blame?’ said Quiney, who was walking up and down in considerable agitation. ‘I say that letter

should never have been put into the parson's hands. Was it meant to be conveyed to Judith?—I warrant me it was not! Did her father say that he wished her chidden; did he ask any of you to bid the parson go to her with his upbraidings; would he himself have been so quick and eager to chasten her proud spirit? I tell you no. He is none of the parson kind. Vexed he might have been; but he would have taken no vengeance. What?—on his own child? By heavens, I'll be sworn now that if he were here, at this minute, he would take the girl by the hand, and laugh at her for being so afraid of his anger—ay, I warrant me he would—and would bid her be of good cheer, and brighten her face, that was ever the brightest in Warwickshire, as I have heard him say. That would he—my life on it!

'Ah,' said Prudence, wistfully, 'if you could only persuade Judith of that!'

'Persuade her?' said he. 'Why, I would stake my life that is what her father would do!'

'You could not persuade her,' said Prudence, with a hopeless air. 'No; she thinks

it is all over now between her father and her. She is disgraced and put away from him. She hath done him such injury, she says, as even his enemies have never done. When he comes back again, she says, to Stratford, she will be here; and she knows that he will never come near this house; and that will be better for her, she says, for she could never again meet him face to face.'

Well, all that day Judith lay there in the solitary room; desiring only to be left alone; taking no food; the racking pains in her head returning from time to time; and now and again she shivered slightly as if from cold. Tom Quiney kept coming and going to hear news of her, or to consult with Prudence as to how to rouse her from this hopelessness of grief; and as the day slowly passed, he grew more and more disturbed and anxious and restless. Could nothing be done?—could nothing be done?—was his constant cry.

He remained late that evening; and Prudence stayed all night at the cottage. In the morning he was over again early; and more distressed than ever to hear that the

girl was wearing herself out with this agony of remorse — crying stealthily when that she thought no one was near ; and hiding herself away from the light ; and refusing to be comforted.

But during the long and silent watches he had been taking counsel with himself.

‘Prudence,’ said he, regarding her with a curious look, ‘do you think now if some assurance were come from her father himself—some actual message from him—a kindly message—some token that he was far indeed from casting her away from him—think you Judith would be glad to have that ?’

‘’Twould be like giving her life back to her,’ said the girl, simply. ‘In truth I dread what may come of this : ’tis not in human nature to withstand such misery of mind. My poor Judith, that was ever so careless and merry !’

He hesitated for a second or two ; and then he said, looking at her, and speaking in a cautious kind of way :

‘Because when next I have need to write to London, I might beg of some one—my brother Dick, perchance, that is now in

Bucklersbury, and would have small trouble in doing such a service—I say I might beg of him to go and see Judith's father, and tell him the true story, and show him that she was not so much to blame. Nay, for my part I see not that she was to blame at all, but for over kindness and confidence, and the wish to exalt her father. The mischief that hath been wrought is the doing of the scoundrel and villain on whose head I trust it may fall ere long; 'twas none of hers. And if her father were to have all that now put fairly and straight before him, think you he would not be right sorry to hear that she had taken his anger so much to heart, and was lying almost as one dead at the very thought of it? I tell you, now, if all this be put before him, and if he send her no comfortable message—ay, and that forthwith and gladly—I have far misread him. And as for her, Prudence—'twould be welcome, say you?'

' 'Twould be of the value of all the world to her,' Prudence said, in her direct and earnest way.

Well, he almost immediately thereafter

left (seeing that he could be of no further help to these women-folk) and walked quickly back to Stratford, and to his house, which was also his place of business. He seemed to hurry through his affairs with speed; then he went upstairs and looked out some clothing; he took down a pair of pistols and put some fresh powder in the pans; and made a few other preparations. Next he went round to the stable; and the stout little Galloway nag whinnied when she saw him at the door.

‘Well, Maggie, lass,’ said he, going into the stall, and patting her neck, and stroking down her knees, ‘what sayst thou? Wouldst like a jaunt that would carry thee many a mile away from Stratford town? Nay, but if you knew the errand, I warrant me you would be as eager as I! What, then—a bargain, lass? By my life, you shall have many a long day’s rest in clover when this sharp work is done!’

CHAPTER VII.

A LOST ARCADIA.

IT was on this same morning that Judith made a desperate effort to rouse herself from the prostration into which she had fallen. All through that long darkness and despair she had been wearily and vainly asking herself whether she could do nothing to retrieve the evil she had wrought. Her good name might go—she cared little for that now ; but was there no means of making up to her father the actual money he had lost ? It was not forgiveness she thought of ; but restitution. Forgiveness was not to be dreamed of ; she saw before her always that angered face she had beheld in the garden ; and her wish was to hide away from that, and be seen of it no more. Then there was another thing : if she were to be permitted to remain at the cottage, ought she not to

show herself willing to take a share of the humblest domestic duties? Might not the good dame begin to regard her as but a useless encumbrance? If it were so that no work her ten fingers could accomplish would ever restore to her father what he had lost through her folly, at least it might win for her her grandmother's forbearance and patience. And so it was that on the first occasion of her head ceasing to ache quite so badly she struggled to her feet (though she was so languid and listless and weak that she could scarcely stand) and put round her the heavy cloak that had been lying on the bed, and smoothed her hair somewhat, and went to the door. There she stood for a minute or two, listening; for she would not go down if there were any strangers about.

The house seemed perfectly still. There was not a sound anywhere. Then, quite suddenly, she heard little Cicely begin to sing to herself—but in snatches, as if she were occupied with other matters—some well-known rhymes to an equally familiar tune—

*'By the moon we sport and play,
With the night begins our day;
As we drink the dew doth fall,
Trip it, dainty urchins all!
Lightly as the little bee,
Two by two, and three by three,
And about go we, go we.'*

—and she made no doubt that the little girl was alone in the kitchen. Accordingly, she went down. Cicely, who was seated near the window, and busily engaged in plucking a fowl, uttered a slight cry when she entered, and started up.

'Dear Mistress Judith,' she said, 'can I do aught for you? Will you sit down? Dear, dear, how ill you do look!'

'I am not at all ill, little Cicely,' said Judith, as cheerfully as she could, and she sate down. 'Give me the fowl—I will do that for you; and you can go and help my grandmother in whatever she is at.'

'Nay, not so,' said the little maid, definitely refusing. 'Why should you?'

'But I wish it,' Judith said. 'Do not vex me, now—go and seek my grandmother, like a good little lass.'

The little maid was thus driven to go; but

it was with another purpose. In about a couple of minutes she had returned, and preceding her was Judith's grandmother.

'What, art come down, wench?' the old dame said, patting her kindly on the shoulder. 'That be so far well—ay, ay, I like that now—that be better for thee than lying all alone. But what would you with the little maid's work, that you would take it out of her hands?'

'Why, if I am idle and do nothing, grandmother, you will be for turning me out of the house,' the girl answered, looking up with a strange kind of smile.

'Turn thee out of the house?' said her grandmother, who had just caught a better glimpse of the wan and tired face. 'Ay, that will I—and now. Come thy ways, wench; 'tis time for thee to be in the fresh air. Cicely, let be the fowl now. Put some more wood on the fire, and hang on the pot—there's a clever lass. And thou, grandchild, come thy ways with me into the garden; and I warrant me when thou comest back a cupful of barley broth will do thee no harm.'

Judith obeyed, though she would fain have

sate still. And then, when she reached the front door, what a bewilderment of light and colour met her eyes! She stood as one dazed for a second or two. The odours of the flowers and the shrubs were so strange, moreover—pungent, and strange, and full of memories. It seemed so long a time since she had seen this wonderful glowing world—and breathed this keen air—that she paused on the stone flag to collect her senses, as it were. And then a kind of faintness came over her, and perhaps she might have sunk to the ground, but that she laid hold of her grandmother's arm.

‘Ay, ay, come thy ways and sit thee down, dearie,’ the old dame said, imagining that the girl was but begging for a little assistance in her walking. ‘I be main glad to see thee out again. I liked not that lying there alone—nay, I wur feared of it, and I bade Prudence send your mother and Susan to see you——’

‘No, no, good grandmother, no, no!’ Judith pleaded, with all the effort that remained to her.

‘But yea, yea!’ her grandmother said

sharply. 'Foolish wench, that would hide away from them that can best aid thee! Ay, and knowest thou how the new disease, as they call it, shows itself at the beginning?—why, with a pinching of the face and sharp pains in the head. Wouldst thou have me let thee lie there, and perchance go from bad to worse, and not send for them—ay, and for Susan's husband, if need were? Nay, but let not that fright thee, good wench,' she said in a gentler way. ''Tis none so bad as I thought, else you would not be venturing down the stairs—nay, nay, there be no harm done as yet, I warrant me—'tis a breath of fresh air to sharpen thee into a hungry fit that will be the best doctor for thee. Here, sit thee down and rest now; and when the barley-broth be warm enough Cicely shall bring thee out a dish of it. Nay, I see no harm done. Keep up thy heart, lass; thou wert ever a brave one; ay, what was there ever that could daunt thee?—and not the boldest of the youths but was afraid of thy laugh and thy merry tongue! Heaven save us, that thou should take on so! And if you would sell yourself to work in slavery in the

Indies, think you they would buy a poor weak trembling creature? Nay, nay, we will have to fetch back the roses to your cheeks ere you make for that bargain, I warrant me!’

They were now seated in the little arbour. On entering Judith had cast her eyes round it in a strange and half-frightened fashion; and now, as she sate there, she was scarcely listening to the good-natured garrulity of the old dame, which was wholly meant to cheer her spirits.

‘Grandmother,’ said she, in a low voice, ‘think you ’twas really he that took away with him my father’s play?’

‘I know not how else it could have been come by,’ said the grandmother, ‘but I pray you, child, heed not that for the present. What be done and gone cannot be helped—let it pass—there, there, now, what a lack of memory have I, that should have shown thee the pretty lace cuffs that Thomas Quiney left for thee—fit for a queen, they be, to be sure—ay, and the fine lace of them, and the silver too. He hath a free hand, he hath; ’tis a fair thing for any that will be in life-

partnership with him ; 'twill not away, marry 'twill not ; 'twill bide in his nature---that will never out of the flesh that's bred in the bone, as they say ; and I like to see a young man that be none of the miser kind, but ready forth with his money where 'tis to please them he hath a fancy for. A brave lad he is too, and one that will hold his own ; and when I told him you were pleased that his business went forward well, why, saith he, as quick as quick : " Said she that ? "—and if my old eyes fail me not, I know of one that setteth greater share by your good word than you imagine, wench.'

She but half heard ; she was recalling all that had happened in this very summer-house.

'And think you, grandmother,' said she, slowly, and with absent eyes, 'that when he was sitting here with us, and telling us all about the Court doings, and about my father's friends in London, and when he was so grateful to us—or saying that he was so—for our receiving of him here, think you that all the time he was planning to steal my father's play and to take it and sell it in London ?

Grandmother, can you think it possible? Could any one be such a hypocrite? I know that he deceived me at the first; but 'twas only a jest; and he confessed it all, and professed his shame that he had so done. But, grandmother, think of him—think of how he used to speak—and ever so modest and gentle; is't possible that all the time he was playing the thief, and looking forward to the getting away to London to sell what he had stolen?"

'For love's sake, sweetheart, heed that man no more!—'tis all done and gone—there can come no good of vexing thyself about it,' her grandmother said. 'Be he villain or not, 'twill be well for all of us that we never hear his name more. In good sooth I am as much to blame as thou thyself, child, for the encouraging him to come about, and listening to his gossip—beshrew me, that I should have meddled in such matters, and not bade him go about his business! But 'tis all past and gone now, as I say—there be no profit in vexing thyself——'

'Past and gone, grandmother!' she exclaimed, and yet in a listless way. 'Yes,

but what remains? Good grandmother, perchance you did not hear all that the parson said. 'Tis past and gone, truly—and more than you think.'

The tone in which she uttered these words somewhat startled the good dame, who looked at her anxiously. And then she said—

'Why, now, I warrant me the barley-broth will be hot enough by this time: I will go fetch thee a cupful, wench—'twill put warmth in thy veins, it will—ay, and cheer thy heart too.'

'Trouble not, good grandmother,' she said. 'I would as lief go back to my room now. The light hurts my eyes strangely.'

'Back to your room?—that shall you not!' was the prompt answer, but not meant unkindly. 'You shall wait here, wench, till I bring thee that will put some colour in thy white face—ay, and some of Thomas Quiney's wine withal; and if the light hurt thee, sit farther back, then—of a truth 'tis no wonder after thou hast hid thyself like a dormouse for so long.'

And so she went away to the house. But she was scarcely gone when Judith—in this

extreme silence that the rustling of a leaf would have disturbed—heard certain voices; and listening more intently she made sure that the new-comers must be Susan and her mother, whom Prudence had asked to walk over. Instantly she got up, though she had to steady herself for a moment by resting her hand on the table; and then, as quickly as she could, and as noiselessly, she stole along the path to the cottage, and entered, and made her way up to her own room. She fancied she had not been heard. She would rather be alone. If they had come to accuse her, what had she to answer? Why, nothing: they might say of her what they pleased now, it was all deserved; only, the one denunciation of her that she had listened to—the one she had heard from the parson—seemed like the ringing of her death-knell. Surely there was no need to repeat that? They could not wish to repeat it, did they but know all it meant to her.

Then the door was quietly opened, and her sister appeared, bearing in one hand a small tray.

‘I have brought you some food, Judith,

and a little wine, and you must try and take them, sweetheart,' said she. 'Twas right good news to us that you had come down and gone into the garden for a space. In truth, making yourself ill will not mend matters; and Prudence was in great alarm.'

She put the tray on a chair, for there was no table in the room; but Judith—finding that her sister had not come to accuse her, but was in this gentle mood—said quickly and eagerly—

'Oh, Susan, you can tell me all that I would so fain know! You must have heard, for my father speaks to you of all his affairs; and at your own wedding you must have heard, when all these things were arranged. Tell me, Susan—I shall have a marriage-portion, shall I not?—and how much, think you? Perchance not so large as yours, for you are the elder, and Doctor Hall was ever a favourite with my father. But I shall have a marriage-portion, Susan, shall I not?—nay, it may already be set aside for me?'

And then the elder sister did glance somewhat reproachfully at her.

‘ I wonder you should be thinking of such things, Judith,’ said she.

‘ Ah, but ’tis not as you imagine,’ the girl said, with the same pathetic eagerness. ‘ ’Tis in this wise now : would my father take it in a measure to repay him for the ill that I have done ? Would it make up the loss, Susan, or a part of it ? Would he take it, think you ? Ah, but if he would do that !’

‘ Why, that were an easy way out of the trouble, assuredly !’ her sister exclaimed. ‘ To take the marriage-portion that is set aside for thee—and if I mistake not, ’tis all provided—ay, and the house and garden in Dead Lane, which will fall to thee, if they are not thine already :—truly, ’twere a wise thing to take these to make good this loss, and then, when you marry, to have to give you your marriage-portion all the same !’

‘ Nay, nay, not so, Susan !’ her sister cried, quickly. ‘ What said you ? The house and garden in the lane as well ? and perchance mine already ? Susan, would they make good the loss ? Would all taken together make good the loss ? For, as heaven is my witness, I will never marry—nor think

of marrying—but rejoice all the days of my life if my father would but take these to satisfy him of the injury I have done him. Nay, but is't possible, Susan? Will he do that for me?—as a kindness to me? I have no right to ask for such—but—but if only he knew—if only he knew!——'

The tears were running down her face; her hands were clasped in abject entreaty.

'Sweetheart, you know not what you ask,' her sister said, but gently. 'When you marry your marriage-portion will have to be in accordance with our position in the town; my father would not have it otherwise; were you to surrender that now, would he let one of his daughters go forth from his house as a beggar, think you? Or what would her husband say to be so treated? You might be willing to give up these; but my father could not; and your husband would not.'

'Susan, Susan, I wish for no marriage,' she cried, 'I will stay with my grandmother here; she is content that I should bide with her; and if my father will take these, 'twill be the joy of my life; I shall wish for no more; and New Place shall come to no harm by me;

'tis here that I am to bide. 'Think you he would take them, Susan—think you he would take them?' she pleaded; and in her excitement she got up and tried to walk about a little, but with her hands still clasped. 'If one were to send to London now—a message—or I would walk every foot of the way did I but think he would do this for me—oh, no! no! no! I durst not—I durst never see him more—he has cast me off—and—and I deserve no less!'

Her sister went to her and took her by the hand.

'Judith, you have been in sore trouble, and scarce know what you say,' she said, in that clear, calm way of hers. 'But this is now what you must do. Sit down and take some of this food. As I hear you have scarce tasted anything these two days. You have always been so wild and wayward: now must you listen to reason and suffer guidance.'

She made her sit down. The girl took a little of the broth, some of the spiced bread, and a little of the wine; but it was clear that she was forcing herself to it. Her thoughts

were elsewhere. And scarcely had she finished this make-believe of a repast when she turned to her sister and said, with a pathetic pleading in her voice—

‘And is it not possible, Susan? Surely I can do something! It is so dreadful to think of my father imagining that I have done him this injury, and gone on the same way careless of what has happened. That terrifies me at night!—oh, if you but knew what it is in the darkness, in the long hours, and none to call to, and none to give you help; and to think that these are the thoughts he has of me—that it was all for a sweetheart I did it—that I gave away his writing to please a sweetheart—and that I care not for what has happened, but would do the like again to-morrow! It is so dreadful in the night.’

‘I would comfort you if I could, Judith,’ said her sister, ‘but I fear me you must trust to wiser counsel than mine. In truth I know not whether all this can be undone, or how my father regards it at the moment; for at the time of the writing they were all uncertain. But surely now you would do well to be ruled by some one better able to guide

you than any of us women-folk ; Master Blaise has been most kind and serviceable in this as in all other matters, and has written to your father in answer to his letter, so that we have had trust and assurance in his direction. And you also—why should you not seek his aid and counsel ?’

At the mere mention of the parson’s name Judith shivered instinctively, she scarce knew why.

‘Judith,’ her sister continued, regarding her watchfully, ‘to-morrow, as I understand, Master Blaise is coming over here to see you.’

‘May not I be spared that ? He has already brought his message,’ the girl said, in a low voice.

‘Nay—he comes but in kindness—or more than kindness, if I guess aright. Be-think you, Judith,’ she said, ‘’tis not only the loss of the money—or great or small I know not—that has distressed my father. There was more than that. Nay, do not think I am come to reproach you ; but will it not be ever thus, so long as you will be ruled by none, but must always go your own way ? There was more than merely concerned

money-affairs in my father's letter, as doubtless Master Blaise hath told you; and then think of it, Judith, how 'twill be when the bruit of the story comes down to Stratford——'

'I care not,' was the perfectly calm answer. 'That is for me to bear. Can Master Blaise tell me how I may restore to my father this that he has lost? Then his visit might be more welcome, Susan.'

'Why will you harden your heart so?' the elder sister said, with some touch of entreaty in her tone. 'Nay, think of it, Judith! Here is an answer to all. If you but listen to him, and favour him, you will have one always with you as a sure guide and counsellor; and who then may dare say a word against you?'

'Then he comes to save my good name?' the girl said, with a curious change of manner. 'Nay, I will give him no such tarnished prize.'

And here it occurred to the elder sister—who was sufficiently shrewd and observant—that her intercession did not seem to be producing good results; and she considered it

better that the parson should speak for himself. Indeed she hoped she had done no mischief; for this that she now vaguely suggested had for long been the dream and desire of both her mother and herself; and at this moment, if ever, there was a chance of Judith's being obedient and compliant. Not only did she forthwith change the subject, but also she managed to conquer the intense longing that possessed her to learn something further about the young man who (as she imagined) had for a time captured Judith's fancies. She gave her sister what news there was in the town. She besought her to take care of herself, and to go out as much as possible—for that she was looking far from well. And finally, when the girl confessed that she was fain to lie down for a space (having slept so little during these two nights), she put some things over her, and quietly left, hoping that she might soon get to sleep.

Judith did not rest long, however. The question whether the sacrifice of her marriage-portion might not do something towards retrieving the disaster she had caused was still harassing her mind; and then again there

was the prospect of the parson coming on the morrow. By and by—when she was certain that her mother and sister were gone—she went downstairs; and began to help in doing this or the other little thing about the house. Her grandmother was out-of-doors, and so did not know to interfere, though the small maidservant remonstrated as best she might. Luckily, however, nature was a more imperative monitress; and again and again the girl had to sit down from sheer physical weakness.

But there came over a visitor in the afternoon who restored to her something of her old spirit. It was little Willie Hart, who, having timidly tapped at the open door without, came along the passage, and entered the dusky chamber where she was.

‘Ah, sweetheart,’ said she (but with a kind of sudden sob in her throat), ‘have you come to see me?’

‘I heard that you were not well, cousin,’ said he, and he regarded her with troubled and anxious eyes as she stooped to kiss him.

‘Nay, I am well enough,’ said she, with as much cheerfulness as she could muster.

‘Fret not yourself about that. And what a studious scholar you are, cousin Willie, to be sure, that must needs bring your book with you! Were I not so ignorant myself I should hear you your tasks; but you would but laugh at me——’

‘’Tis no task-book, Judith,’ said he, diffidently. ‘’Twas Prudence who lent it to me.’

And then he hesitated, through shyness.

‘Why, you know, Judith,’ he said, ‘you have spoken to me many a time about Sir Philip Sidney; and I was asking this one and the other, at times; and Prudence said she would show me a book he had written, that belongs to her brother. And then to-day when I went to her, she bade me bring the book to you, and to read to you, for that you were not well, and might be pleased to hear it, she not being able to come over till the morrow.’

‘In truth, now, that was well thought of and friendly,’ said she, and she put her hand in a kindly fashion on his shoulder. ‘And you have come all the way over to read to me—see you how good a thing it is to be wise and instructed! Well, then, we will go

and sit by the door, that, you may have more of light ; and if my grandmother catch us at such idleness you shall have to defend me—you shall have to defend me, sweetheart—for you are the man of us two, and I must be shielded.'

So they went to the door and sate down on the step—the various-coloured garden, and the trees, and the wide heavens all shining before them.

'And what is the tale, cousin Willie?' said she, quite pleasantly (for indeed she was glad to see the boy, and to chat with one who had no reproaches for her, who knew nothing against her, but was ever her true lover and slave). 'Nay, if it be by Sir Philip Sidney, 'twill be of gallant and noble knights assuredly.'

'I know not, cousin Judith,' said he, 'I but looked at the beginning as I came through the fields. And this is how it goes.'

He opened the book, and began to read—

'It was in the time that the Earth begins to put on her new apparel against the approach of her lover, and that the sun running a most

even course becomes an indifferent arbiter between the night and the day, when the hopeless shepherd Strephon was come to the sands which lie against the island of Cithera, where, viewing the place with a heavy kind of delight, and sometimes casting his eyes to the isleward, he called his friendly rival the pastor Claius unto him; and, setting first down in his darkened countenance a doleful copy of what he would speak, "O my Claius," said he——'

Thus he went on; and as he read, her face grew more and more wistful. It was a far-off land that she heard of, and beautiful it was; it seemed to her that she had been dwelling in some such land, careless and all unknowing.

'The third day after,' she vaguely heard him say, 'in the time that the morning did strew roses and violets in the heavenly floor against the coming of the sun, the nightingales, striving one with the other which could in most dainty variety recount their wrong-caused sorrow, made them put off their sleep; and, rising from under a tree, which that night had been their pavilion, they went on

their journey, which by and by welcomed Musidorus' eyes with delightful prospects. There were hills which garnished their proud heights with stately trees; humble valleys whose base estate seemed comforted with the refreshing of silver rivers; meadows enamelled with all sorts of eye-pleasing flowers; thickets which, being lined with most pleasant shade, were witnessed so to, by the cheerful disposition of many well-tuned birds; each pasture stored with sheep, feeding with sober security, while the pretty lambs, with bleating oratory, craved the dams' comfort; here a shepherd's boy piping, as though he should never be old; there a young shepherdess knitting, and withal singing: and it seemed that her voice comforted her hands to work, and her hands kept time to her voice-music.'

Surely she had herself been living in some such land of pleasant delights, without a thought that ever it would end for her, but that each following day would be as full of mirth and laughter as its predecessor. She scarcely listened to the little lad now. She was looking back over the years. So rare and bright and full of light and colour were

they—and always a kind of music in them—and laughter at the sad eyes of lovers. She had never known how happy she had been. It was all distant now—the idle flower-gathering in the early spring-time; the afternoon walking in the meadows, she and Prudence together (with the young lads regarding them askance); the open case-ments on the moonlit nights, to hear the madrigal-singing of the youths going home; or the fair and joyous mornings that she was allowed to ride away in the direction of Oxford, to meet her father and his companions coming in to Stratford town. And now—when next he should come—to all of them—and all of them welcoming him—even neighbours and half-strangers—and he laughing to them all, and getting off his horse, and calling for a cup of wine as he strode into the house: where should she be? Not with all of these—not laughing and listening to the merry stories of the journey—but away by herself, hiding herself as it were, and thinking, alone.

‘Dear Judith, but why are you crying?’ said the little lad as he chanced to look up;

and his face was of an instant and troubled anxiety.

‘Why, ’tis a fair land—oh, indeed, a fair land,’ said she, with an effort at regarding the book, and pretending to be wholly interested in it. ‘Nay, I would hear more of Musidorus, sweetheart, and of that pretty country. I pray you continue the reading—continue the reading, sweetheart Willie. Nay, I never heard of a fairer country, I assure thee, in all the wide world!’

CHAPTER VIII.

A RESOLVE.

THEN that night, as she lay awake in the dark, her incessant imaginings shaped themselves towards one end. This passion of grief she knew to be unavailing and fruitless. Something she would try to do if but to give evidence of her contrition; for how could she bear that her father should think of her as one having done him this harm and still going on light-hearted and unconcerned? The parson was coming over on the morrow. And if she were to put away her maidenly pride (and other vague dreams that she had sometimes dreamed), and take it that her consent would re-establish her in the eyes of those who were now regarding her askance, and make her peace with her own household? And if the surrender of her marriage-portion and her interest in the Chapel Lane property (what-

ever it might be) were in a measure to mitigate her father's loss? It was the only thing she could think of. And if at times she looked forward with a kind of shudder (for in the night-time all prospects wear a darker hue) to her existence as the parson's wife, again there came to her the reflection that it was not for her to repine. Some sacrifice was due from her. And could she not be as resolute as the daughter of the Gileadite? Oftentimes she had heard the words read out in the still afternoon: 'Now when Iphtah came to Mizpeh unto his house, behold his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and dances: which was his only child; he had none other son nor daughter. And when he saw her he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter, thou hast brought me low, and art of them that trouble me.' The Jewish maiden had done no ill, and yet was brave to suffer; why should she repine at any sacrifice demanded of her to atone for her own wrong-doing? What else was there? She hoped that Susan and her mother would be pleased now; and that her father and his friends in London

would not have any serious loss to regret. There was but the one way, she said to herself again and again. She was almost anxious for the parson to come over, to see if he would approve.

With the daylight her determination became still more clear, and also she saw more plainly the difficulties before her. For it could not be deemed a very seemly and maidenly thing that she, on being asked to become a bride (and she had no doubt that was his errand), should begin to speak of her marriage - portion. But would he understand? Would he help her over her embarrassment? Nay, she could not but reflect, here was an opportunity for his showing himself generous and large-minded. He had always professed, or at least intimated, that his wish to have her for wife was based mostly on his care for herself and his regard for the general good of the pious community to which he belonged. She was to be a helpmate for one labouring in the Lord's vineyard; she was to be of service in the Church; she was to secure for herself a constant and loving direction and guidance.

And now if he wished to prove all this—if he wished to show himself so noble and disinterested as to win for himself her lifelong gratitude—what if he were to take over all her marriage-portion, as that might be arranged, and forthwith and chivalrously hand it back again, so that her grievous fault should so far be condoned? If the girl had been in her usual condition of health and spirits it is probable that she would have regarded this question with a trifle of scepticism (for she was about as shrewd in such matters as Susan herself), nay, it is just probable that she might have experienced a malicious joy in putting him to the proof. But she was in despair; her nerves were gone through continual wakefulness and mental torture; this was the only direction in which she saw light before her; and she regarded it, not with her ordinary faculty of judgment, but with a kind of pathetic hope.

Master Blaise arrived in the course of the morning. His reception was not auspicious, for the old dame met him at the gate and made more than a show of barring the way.

‘Indeed, good sir,’ said she, firmly, ‘the

wench be far from well now, and I would have her left alone.'

He answered that his errand was of some importance, and that he must crave a few minutes' interview. Both her mother and sister, he said, were aware he was coming over to see her, and had made no objection.

'No, no, perchance not,' the grandmother said, though without budging an inch, 'but she be under my care now, and I will have no harm befall her——'

'Harm, good Mistress Hathaway?' said he.

'Well, she be none so strong as she were—and—and perchance there hath been overmuch lecturing of the poor lass. Nay, I doubt not 'twas meant in kindness, but there hath been overmuch of it, as I reckon, and what I say is, if the wench have done amiss, let those that have the right to complain come to her. Nay, 'twas kindness, good sir; 'twas well meant, I doubt not, and 'tis your calling belike to give counsel and reproof; I say naught against that, but I am of a mind to have my grandchild left alone at present.'

'If you refuse me, good Mistress Hatha-

way,' said he, quite courteously and calmly, 'there is no more to be said. But I imagine that her mother and sister will be surprised. And as for the maiden herself—go you by her wishes?'

'Nay, not I,' was the bold answer. 'I know better than all of them together. For to speak plain with you, good Master parson, your preaching must have been over sharp when last you were within here, and was like to have brought the wench to death's door thereafter — marry, she be none so far recovered as to risk any further of such treatment. Perchance you meant no harm; but she is proud and high-spirited, and, by your leave, good sir, we will see her a little stronger and better set up ere she have any more of the discipline of the Church bestowed on her.'

It was well that Judith appeared at this juncture, for the tone of the old dame's voice was growing more and more tart.

'Grandmother,' said she, 'I would speak with Master Blaise.'

'Get thee within-doors at once, I tell thee, wench,' was the peremptory rejoinder.

‘No, good grandmother, so please you,’ Judith said, ‘I must speak with him. There is much of importance that I have to say to him. Good sir, will you step into the garden?’

The old dame withdrew, sulky and grumbling, and evidently inclined to remain within earshot, lest she should deem it necessary to interfere. Judith preceded Master Blaise to the door of the cottage, and asked the little maid to bring out a couple of chairs. As she sat down, he could not but observe how wan and worn her face was, and how listless she was in manner; but he made no comment on that; he only remarked that her grandmother seemed in no friendly mood this morning, and that only the fact that his mission was known to Susan and her mother had caused him to persist.

It was clear that this untoward reception had disconcerted him somewhat, and it was some little time before he could recover that air of mild authority with which he was accustomed to convey his counsels. At first he confined himself to telling Judith what he had done on behalf of her mother and Susan

—in obedience to their wishes ; but by and by he came to herself and her own situation, and he hoped that this experience through which she had passed, though it might have caused her bitter distress for the time, would eventually make for good. If the past could not be recalled, at least the future might be made safe. Indeed, one or two phrases he had used sounded as if they had done some previous service ; perhaps he had consulted with Mrs. Hall ere making this appeal ; but in any case Judith was not listening so particularly as to think of that—she seemed to know beforehand what he had to say.

To tell the truth, he was himself a little surprised at her tacit acquiescence. He had always had to argue with Judith ; and many a time he had found that her subtle feminine wit was capable of extricating herself from what he considered a defenceless position. But now she sate almost silent. She seemed to agree to everything. There was not a trace left of the old audacious self-reliance, nor yet of those saucy rejoinders which were only veiled by her professed respect for his cloth. She was at his mercy.

And so, growing bolder, he put in his own personal claim. He said little that he had not said or hinted on previous occasions ; but now all the circumstances were changed ; this heavy misfortune that had befallen her was but another and all too cogent reason why she should accept his offer of shelter and aid and counsel, seeing into what pitfalls her own unguided steps were like to lead her.

‘ I speak the words of truth and soberness,’ said he, as he sate and calmly regarded her downcast face, ‘ and make no appeal to the foolish fancies of a young and giddy-headed girl, for that you are no longer, Judith. The years are going by. There must come a time in life when the enjoyment of the passing moment is not all in all ; when one must look to the future, and make provision for sickness and old age. Death strikes here and there ; friends fall away ; what a sad thing it were to find oneself alone—the dark clouds of life thickening over, and none by to help and cheer ! Then your mother and sister, Judith——’

‘ Yes, I know,’ she said, almost in despair, ‘ I know ’twould please them.’

And then she reflected that this was scarcely the manner in which she should receive his offer, that was put before her so plainly and with so much calm sincerity.

‘I pray you, good sir,’ said she, in a kind of languid way, ‘forgive me if I answer you not as frankly as might be. I have been ill; my head aches now; perchance I have not followed all you said. But I understand it—I understand it—and in all you say there is naught but good intention.’

‘Then it is yes, Judith?’ he exclaimed; and for the first time there was a little brightness of ardour—almost of triumph—in this clearly conceived and argued wooing.

‘It would please my mother and sister,’ she repeated, slowly. ‘They are afraid of some story coming from London about—about—what is passed. This would be an answer, would it not?’

‘Why, yes!’ he said, confidently, for he saw that she was yielding (and his own susceptibilities were not likely to be wounded in that direction). ‘Think you we should heed any tavern scurrility? I trow not! There

would be the answer plain and clear—if you were my wife, Judith.'

'They would be pleased,' again she said, and her eyes were absent. And then she added: 'I pray you pardon me, good sir, if I speak of that which you may deem out of place—but—but if you knew—how I have been striving to think of some means of repairing the wrong I have done my father, you would not wonder that I should be anxious, and perchance indiscreet. You know of the loss I have caused him and his companions. How could I ever make that good with the work of my own hands? That is not possible; and yet when I think of how he hath toiled for all of us—late and early, as it were—why, good sir, I have myself been bold enough to chide him—or to wish that I were a man to ride forth in the morning in his stead and look after the land; and then that his own daughter should be the means of taking from him what he hath earned so hardly—that I should never forget; 'twould be on my mind year after year; even if he were himself to try to forget it.'

She paused for a second ; the mere effort of speaking seemed to fatigue her.

‘There is but the one means, as I can think, of showing him my humble sorrow for what has been done—of making him some restitution. I know not what my marriage-portion may be—but ’twill be something—and Susan says there is the house in Dead Lane also, that would fall to me ; now, see you, good Master Blaise, if I were to give these over to my father in part quittance of this injury—or if belike—my—my—husband would do that—out of generosity and nobleness—would not my father be less aggrieved ?’

She had spoken rather quickly and breathlessly (to get over her embarrassment), and now she regarded him with a strange anxiety, for so much depended on his answer ! Would he understand her motives ? Would he pardon her bluntness ? Would he join her in this scheme of restitution ?

He hesitated only for a moment.

‘Dear Judith,’ he said, with perfect equanimity, ‘such matters are solely within the province of men, and not at the disposition

of women, who know less of the affairs of the world. Whatever arrangements your father may have made in respect of your marriage-portion—truly I have made no inquiry in that direction—he will have made with due regard to his own circumstances, and with regard to the family and to your future. Would he be willing to upset these in order to please a girlish fancy? Why, in all positions in life, pecuniary losses must happen; and a man takes account of these; and is he likely to recover himself at the expense of his own daughter?——’

‘Nay, but if she be willing! If she would give all that she hath, good sir!’ she cried, quickly.

‘’Twould be but taking it from one pocket to put it in the other,’ said he, in his patient and forbearing way. ‘I say not, if a man were like to become bankrupt, that his family might not forego their expectations in order to save him; but your father is one in good position. Think you that the loss is so great to him? In truth it cannot be.’

The eagerness fell away from her face. She saw too clearly that he could not under-

stand her at all. She did not reckon her father's loss in proportion to his wealth—in truth, she could not form the faintest notion of what that loss might be : all her thought was of her winning back (in some remote day, if that were still possible to her) to her father's forgiveness, and the regarding of his face as no longer in dread wrath against her.

‘Why,’ said he, seeing that she sate silent and distraught (for all the hope had gone out of her), ‘in every profession and station in life a man must have here or there a loss, as I say ; but would he rob his family to make that good ? Surely not. Of what avail might that be ? ’Tis for them that he is working ; ’tis not for himself ; why should he take from them to build up a property which must in due course revert and become theirs ? I pray you put such fancies out of your head, Judith. Women are not accustomed to deal with such matters ; ’tis better to have them settled in the ordinary fashion. Were I you I would leave it in your father's hands.’

‘And have him think of me as he is thinking now !’ she said, in a kind of wild way. ‘Ah ! good sir, you know not !—you know

not! Every day that passes is but the deeper misery—for—for he will be hardened in the belief—'twill be fixed in his mind for ever—that his own daughter did him this wrong; and went on lightly—not heeding—perchance to seek another sweetheart. This he is thinking now; and I—what can I do?—being so far away—and none to help!——'

'In truth, dear Judith,' said he, 'you make too much of your share in what happened. 'Tis not to you your father should look for reparation of his loss, but to the scoundrel who carried the play to London. What punishment would it be for him—or what gain to your father—that your father should upset the arrangements he has made for the establishment and surety of his own family? Nay, I pray you put aside such a strange fancy, dear heart; and let such things take their natural course.'

'In no wise, in no wise!' she exclaimed, almost in despair. 'In truth I cannot. 'Twould kill me were nothing to be done to appease my father's anger; and I thought that if he were to learn that you had sought me in marriage—and—and agreed that such

restitution as I can make should be made forthwith—or afterwards, as might be decided—but only that he should know now that I give up everything he had intended for me—then I should have greater peace of mind.’

‘Indeed, Judith,’ said he, somewhat coldly, ‘I could be no party to any such foolish freak—nay, not even in intention, whatever your father might say to it. The very neighbours would think I was bereft of my senses. And ’twould be an ill beginning of our life together—in which there must ever be authority and guidance as well as dutiful obedience—if I were to yield to what every one must perceive to be an idle and fantastic wish. I pray you consult your own sober judgment ; at present you are ailing and perturbed : rest you a while until these matters have calmed somewhat, and you will see them in their true light.’

‘No, no,’ she said, hurriedly and absently. ‘No, no, good sir ; you know not what you ask. Rest ? Nay, one way or the other this must be done, and forthwith. I know not what he may have intended for me ; but be it large or small ’tis all that I have to give him

—I can do no more than that—and then—then there may be some thoughts of rest.’

She spoke as if she were scarcely aware of the good parson’s presence ; and in truth, though he was not one to allow any wounded self-love to mar his interests, he could not conceal from himself that she was considering the proposal he had put before her mainly, if not wholly, with a view to the possible settlement of these troubles and the appeasing of her friends. Whether, in other circumstances, he might not have calmly overlooked this slight, needs not now be regarded ; in the present circumstances—that is to say, after her announced determination to forego every penny of her marriage-portion—he did take notice of it, and with some sharpness of tone, as if he were truly offended.

‘Indeed you pay me no compliment, Judith,’ said he. ‘I come to offer you the shelter of an honest man’s home, an honourable station as his wife, a lifelong guidance and protection ; and what is your answer ?—that perchance you may make use of such an offer to please your friends and to pay back to your father what you foolishly think you owe him.

If these be the only purposes you have in view—and you seem to think of none other—'twould be a sorry forecast for the future, as I take it. At the very beginning an act of madness! Nay, I could be no party to any such thing. If you refuse to be guided by me in great matters, how could I expect you to be guided in small?’

These words, uttered in his clear and precise and definite manner, she but vaguely understood (for her head troubled her sorely, and she was tired, and anxious to be at rest) to be a withdrawal of his proposal; but that was enough, and perhaps she even experienced some slight sense of relief. As for his rebuking of her, she heeded not that.

‘As you will, sir, as you will,’ she said listlessly; and she rose from her chair.

And he rose too. Perhaps he was truly offended, perhaps he only appeared to be; but at all events he bade her farewell in a cold and formal manner, and as if it were he who had brought this interview to an end, and that for good.

‘What said he, wench, what said he?’ her grandmother asked (who had been pretending

all the time to be gathering peas, and now came forward). ‘Nay, I caught but little—a word here or there—and yet methinks ’tis a brave way of wooing they have nowadays, that would question a maid about her marriage-portion! Heaven’s mercy, did ever any hear the like? ’Twas not so when I was young—nay, a maid would have bade him go hang that brought her such a tale. Oh, the good parson!—his thoughts be not all bent on heaven, I warrant me! Ay, and what said he? And what saidst thou, wench? Truly you be in no fit state to answer him; were you well enough, and in your usual, the good man would have his answer—ay, as sharp as need be. But I will say no more; Master Quiney hath a vengeful spirit, and perchance he hath set me too much against the good man; but as for thyself, lass, there be little cause for talking further of thy offences, if ’tis thy marriage-portion the parson be after now!’

‘Good grandmother, give me your arm,’ Judith said, in a strange way. ‘My head is so strange and giddy. I know not what I have said to him—I scarce can recollect it—

if I have offended bid him forgive me—but —but I would have him remain away.'

'As I am a living woman,' said the old dame (forgetting her resolve to speak smooth words), 'he shall not come within the door nor yet within that gate while you bide with me and would have him kept without! What, then? More talk of chastenings? Marry, now, Thomas Quiney shall hear of this—that shall he—by my life he shall!'

'No, no, no, good grandmother, pray you blame no one,' the girl said—and she was trembling somewhat. ''Tis I that have done all the harm—to every one. But I know not what I said—I—I would fain lie down, grandmother, if you will give me your arm so far—'tis so strangely cold—I understand it not—and I forget what was't he said to me—but I trust I offended him not——'

'Nay, but what is it, then, my dearie?' the old woman said, taking both the girl's hands in hers. 'What is it that you should fret about? Nay, fret not, fret not, good wench; the parson be well away, and there let him bide. And would you lie down?—'

well, come, then ; but sure you shake as if 'twere winter. Come, lass!—nay, fret not, we will keep the parson away, I warrant, if 'tis that that vexes thee !'

'No, grandmother, 'tis not so,' the girl said, in a low voice. ' 'Twas down by the river, as I think—'twas chilly there—I have felt it ever since from time to time—but 'twill pass away when I am lain down and become warm again.'

'Heaven grant it be no worse,' the old dame said to herself, as she shrewdly looked at the girl ; but of course her outward talk, as she took her within doors, was ostensibly cheerful. 'Come thy ways, then, sweeting, and we shall soon make thee warm enough. Ay, ay, and Prudence be coming over this afternoon, as I hear ; and no doubt Thomas Quiney too ; and thou must get thyself dressed prettily, and have supper with us all, though 'tis no treat to offer to a man of his own wine. Nay, I warrant me he will think naught of that, so thou be there with a pleasant look for him ; he will want nor wine nor aught else if he have but that, and a friendly word from thee, as I reckon ; ay,

and thou shalt put on the lace cuffs, now, to do him fair service for his gift to thee—that shalt thou, and why not?—I swear to thee, my brave lass, they be fit for a queen!’

And she would comfort her, and help her (just as if this granddaughter of hers, that always was so bright, and gay, and radiant, so self-willed and self-reliant, with nothing but laughter for the sad eyes of the stricken youths, was now but a weak and frightened child, that had to be guarded, and coaxed, and caressed), and would talk as if all her thinking was of that visit in the afternoon; but the only answer was—

‘Will you send for Prudence, grandmother? Oh, grandmother, my head aches so! I scarce know what I said.’

Swiftly and secretly the old dame sent across to the town; and not to Prudence only, but also (for she was grown anxious) to Mistress Hall, to say that if her husband were like to return soon to Stratford he might come over and see Judith, who was far from well. As for Prudence, a word was sufficient to bring her; she was there straight-way.

She found Judith very much as she had left her; but somewhat more restless and feverish perhaps; and then again hopelessly weak and languid; and always with those racking pains in the head. She said it was nothing—it would soon pass away; it was but a chill she had caught in sitting on the river-bank; would not Prudence now go back to her duties and her affairs in the house?

‘Judith,’ said her friend, leaning over her and speaking low, ‘I have that to tell thee will comfort thee, methinks.’

‘Nay, I cannot listen to it now,’ was the answer—and it was a moan almost. ‘Dear mouse, do not trouble about me—but my head is so bad that I—that I care not now. And the parson is gone away thinking that I have wronged him also—’tis ever the same now—oh, sweetheart, my head, my head!’

‘But listen, Judith,’ the other pleaded. ‘Nay, but you must know what your friends are ready to do for you—this surely will make thee well, sweetheart. Think of it now: do you know that Quiney is gone to see your father?’

‘To my father?’ she repeated, and she tried to raise her head somewhat, so that her eyes might read her friend’s face.

‘I am almost sure of it, dear heart,’ Prudence said, taking her hot hand in hers. ‘Nay, he would have naught said of it. None of his family know whither he is gone, and I but guess. But this is the manner of it, dear Judith—that he and I were talking; and sorely vexed he was that your father should be told a wrong story concerning you; ay, and sorry to see you so shaken, Judith, and distressed; and, said he, “What if I were to get a message to her from her father—that he was in no such mood of anger, and had not heard the story aright, and that he was well disposed to her, and grieved to hear she had taken it so much to heart—would not that comfort her?” he said. And I answered that assuredly it would, and even more perchance than he thought of; and I gathered from him that he would write to some one in London to go and see your father and pray him to send you assurance of that kind. But now—nay, I am certain of it, dear Judith—I am certain that he himself is gone all the way

to London to bring thee back that comfort ; and will not that cheer thee now, sweet-heart ?’

‘ He is doing all that for me ? ’ the girl said, in a low voice, and absently.

‘ Ah, but you must be well and cheerful, good mouse, to give him greeting when he comes back,’ said Prudence, striving to raise her spirits somewhat. ‘ Have I not read to thee many a time how great kings were wont to reward the messengers that brought them good news ?—a gold chain round their neck, or lands perchance. And will you have no word of welcome for him ? Will you not meet him with a glad face ? Why, think of it now—a journey to London, and the perils and troubles by the way—and all done to please thee. Nay, he would say naught of it to any one, lest they might wonder at his doing so much for thee, belike ; but when he comes back ’twere a sorry thing that you should not give him a good and gracious welcome.’

Judith lay silent and thinking for a while ; and then she said—but as if the mere effort to speak were too much for her :

‘Whatever happens, dear Prudence—nay, in truth I think I am very ill—tell him this—that he did me wrong—he thought I had gone to meet the parson that Sunday morning in the churchyard—’twas not so—tell him it was not so—’twas but a chance, dear heart—I could not help it——’

‘Judith, Judith,’ her friend said, ‘these be things for thine own telling. Nay, you shall say all that to himself; and you must speak him fair; ay, and give him good welcome and thanks that hath done so much for thee.’

Judith put her head down on the pillow again—languidly; but presently Prudence heard her laugh to herself in a strange way.

‘Last night,’ she said, ‘’twas so wonderful, dear Prue. I thought I was going about in a strange country, looking for my little brother Hamnet, and I knew not whether he would have any remembrance of me. Should I have to tell him my name, I kept asking myself? And “Judith, Judith,” I said to him, when I found him, but he scarce knew; I thought he had forgotten me, ’tis so long ago now. “Judith, Judith,” I said; and he looked up, and he was so strangely like little

Willie Hart that I wondered whether it was Hamnet or no——’

But Prudence was alarmed by these wanderings, and did her best to hush them. And then, when at length the girl lay silent and still, Prudence stole downstairs again and bade the grandmother go to Judith’s room, for that she must at once hurry over to Stratford to speak with Susan Hall.

CHAPTER IX.

ARRIVALS.

SOME few mornings after that two travellers were standing in the spacious archway of the inn at Shipston, chatting to each other, and occasionally glancing towards the stable-yard, as if they were expecting their horses to be brought round.

‘The wench will thank thee for this service done her,’ the elder of the two said; and he regarded the younger man in a shrewd and not unkindly way.

‘Nay, I am none well pleased with the issue of it all,’ the young man said, moodily.

‘What, then?’ his companion said. ‘Can nothing be done and finished but with the breaking of heads? Must that ever crown the work? Mercy on us!—how many would you have slaughtered? Now ’tis the parson that must be thrown into the

Avon ; again it is Gentleman Jack you would have us seek out for you ; and then it is his friend—whose very name we know not—that you would pursue through the dens and stews of London town. A hopeful task, truly, for a Stratford youth ! What know you of London, man ? And to pursue one whose very name you know not—and all for the further breaking of heads, that never did any good anywhere in the world.’

‘ You are right, sir,’ the younger man said, with some bitterness. ‘ I can brag and bluster as well as any. But I see not that much comes of it. ’Tis easy to break the heads of scoundrels—in talk. Their bones are none the worse.’

‘ And better so,’ the other said, gravely. ‘ I would have no blood shed. What, man, are you still fretting that I would not leave you behind in London ? ’

‘ Nay, sir, altogether I like not the issue of it,’ he said, but respectfully enough. ‘ I shall be told, I doubt not, that I might have minded my own business. They will blame me for bringing you all this way, and hindering your affairs.’

‘Heaven bless us,’ said the other, laughing, ‘may not a man come to see his own daughter without asking leave of the neighbours?’

‘’Tis as like as not that she herself will be the first to chide me,’ the younger man answered. ‘A message to her was all I asked of you, sir. I dreamt not of hindering your affairs so.’

‘Nay, nay,’ said Judith’s father, good-naturedly. ‘I can make the occasion serve me well. Trouble not about that, friend Quiney. If we can cheer up the wench and put her mind at rest—that will be a sufficient end of the journey; and we will have no broken heads withal, so please you. And if she herself should have put aside these idle fears, and become her usual self again, why, then, there is no harm done either. I mind me that some of them wondered that I should ride down to see my little Hamnet when he lay sick; for ’twas no serious illness that time as it turned out; but what does that make for now? Now, I tell you, I am right glad I went to see the little lad; it cheered him to be made so much of; and such small services or kindnesses are pleasant things for our-

selves to think of when those that are dearest to us are no longer with us. So cease your fretting, friend Quiney. For the hindering of my affairs I take it that I am answerable to myself, and not to the good gossips of Stratford town. And if 'tis merely to say a kind word to the lass—if that is all that needs be done—well, there are many things that are of different value to different people ; and the wench and I understand each other shrewdly well.'

The horses were now brought round ; but ere they mounted, Judith's father said—again regarding the youth in that observant way—

'Nay, I see how it is with you, good lad : you are anxious as to how Judith may take this service you have done her—is't not so ?'

'Perchance she may be angry that I called you away, sir,' he said.

'Have no fear. 'Twas none of thy doing. 'Twas but a whim of mine own—nay, there be other and many reasons for my coming—that need not to be explained to her. What, must I make apology to my own daughter ? She is not the guardian of Stratford town ? I am no rogue ; she is no constable. May

not I enter? Nay, nay, have no fear, friend Quiney; when that she comes to understand the heavy errand you undertook for her, she will give you her thanks, or I know nothing of her. Her thanks?—marry, yes!’

He looked at the young man again.

‘But let there be no broken heads, good friend, I charge you,’ said he, as he put his foot in the stirrup. ‘If the parson have been over-zealous we will set all matters straight without hurt or harm to any son of Adam.’

And now as they rode on together, the younger man’s face seemed more confident and satisfied; and he was silent for the most part. Of course he would himself be the bearer of the news; it was but natural that he should claim as much. And as Judith’s father intended to go first to New Place, Quiney intimated to him that he would rather not ride through the town; in fact, he wanted to get straightway (and unobserved if possible) to Shottery, to see how matters were there.

When he arrived at the little hamlet, Willie Hart was in the garden, and instantly came down to the gate to meet him. He asked no questions of the boy, but begged

of him to hold the bridle of his horse for a few minutes ; then he went into the house.

Just within the threshold he met Judith's sister.

‘ Ah,’ said he, quickly—and even joyously, ‘ I have brought good news. Where is Judith ? May I see her ? I want to tell her that her father is come, and will be here to see her presently——’

And then something in the scared face that was regarding him struck him with a sudden terror.

‘ What is it ?’ he said, with his own face become about as pale as hers.

‘ Judith is very ill,’ was the answer.

‘ Yes, yes,’ he said, eagerly, ‘ and that she was when I left. But now that her father is come, ’twill be all different—’twill be all set right now. And you will tell her, then, if I may not ? Nay, but may not I see her for a moment—but for a moment—to say how her father is come all the way to see her—ay, and hath a store of trinkets for her, and is come to comfort her into assurance that all will go well. Why, will not such a message cheer her ?’

‘Good Master Quiney,’ Susan said, with tears welling into her eyes, ‘if you were to see her she would not know you—she knows no one—she knows not that she is ill—but speaks of herself as some other—’

‘But her father!’ he exclaimed, in dismay, ‘will she not know him? Will she not understand? Nay, surely ’tis not yet too late!’

But here Doctor Hall appeared; and when he was told that Judith’s father was come to the town and would shortly be at the cottage, he merely said that perchance his presence might soothe her somewhat, or even lead her delirious wanderings into a gentler channel, but that she would almost certainly be unable to recognise him. Nor was the fever yet at its height, he said, and they could do little for her. They could but wait and hope. As for Quiney, he did not ask to be admitted to the room. He seemed stunned. He sate down in the kitchen—heeding no one—and vaguely wondering whether any lengthening of the stages of the journey would have brought them in better time. Nay, had he not wasted precious hours in London in vainly seek-

ing to find himself face to face with Jack Orridge?

Prudence chanced to come downstairs. As she entered the kitchen he forgot to give her any greeting; he only said, quickly—

‘Think you she will not understand that her father is come to see her? Surely she must understand so much, Prudence! You will tell her, will you not?—and if she sees him standing before her?’

‘I know not, I am afraid,’ said Prudence, anxiously. ‘Perchance it may frighten her the more; for ever she says that she sees him, and always with an angry face towards her; and she is for hiding herself away from him—and even talking of the river—good lack, ’tis pitiful—that she should be so struck down—and almost at death’s door—and all we can do of so little avail.’

‘Prudence,’ said he, starting to his feet, ‘there is her father just come; I hear him; now take him to her—and you will see—you will see. I may not go; a strange face might frighten her; but I know she will recognise him—and understand—and he will tell her to have no longer any fear of him——’

Prudence hurried away to meet Judith's father, who was in the doorway, getting such information as was possible from the doctor. And then they all of them (all but Quiney) stole gently upstairs; and they stood at the door in absolute silence; while Judith's father went forward to the bed—so quietly that the girl did not seem to notice his approach.

The grandmother was there, sitting by the bedside, and speaking to her in a low voice.

'Hush thee now, sweeting, hush thee now,' she was saying, and she patted her hand. 'Nay, I know 'twas ill done; 'tis quite right what thou sayst; they treated her not well; and the poor wench anxious to please them all. But have no fear for her; nay, trouble not thy head with thoughts of her; she be safe at home again, I trust. Hush thee, now, sweeting; 'twill go well with her, I doubt not; I swear to thee her father be no longer angry with the wench; 'twill all go well with her, and well. Have no fear!'

The girl looked at her steadily, and yet with a strange light in her eyes, as if she saw distant things before her, or was seeking to recall them.

‘There was Susan too,’ she said, in a low voice, ‘that sang so sweet—oh, in the church it was so sweet to hear her—but when it was “*The rose is from my garden gone,*” she would not sing that—though that was ever in her sister’s mind after she went away down to the river-side—I cannot think why they would not sing it to her—perchance the parson thought ’twas wicked—I know not now. And when she herself would try it with the lute, nothing would come right—all went wrong with her—all went wrong—and her father came angry and terrible to seek her—and ’twas the parson that would drag her forth—the bushes were not thick enough—good grandam, why should the bushes in the garden be so thin that the terrible eyes peered through them, and she tried to hide, and could not?——’

‘Nay, I tell thee, sweetheart,’ said the grandmother, whispering to her, ‘that the poor wench you speak of went home; and all were well content with her; and her father was right pleased—indeed, indeed ’twas so.’

‘Poor Judith, poor Judith,’ the girl mur-

mured to herself; and then she laughed slightly. 'She was ever the stupid one; naught would go right with her; ay, and evil-tempered she was, too, for Quiney would ride all the way to London for her, and she thanked him with never a word or a look—never a word or a look, and he going all the way to please her. Poor wench, all went wrong with her somehow; but they might have let her go; she was so anxious to hide; and then to drag her forth—from under the bushes—grandam, it was cruelly done of them, was it not?'

'Ay, ay, but hush thee, now, dearie,' her grandmother said, as she put a cool cloth on the burning forehead. ''Tis quite well now with the poor wench you speak of.'

Her father drew nearer, and took her hand quietly.

'Judith,' said he, 'poor lass, I am come to see you.'

For an instant there was a startled look of fear in her eyes; but that passed, and she regarded him, at first, with a kind of smiling wonder, and thereafter with a contented satisfaction, as though his presence was familiar.

Nay, she turned her attention altogether towards him now, and addressed him—not in any heart-broken way, but cheerfully, and as if he had been listening to her all along. It was clear that she did not in the least know who he was.

‘There, now, lass,’ said he, ‘knowest thou that Quiney and I have ridden all the way from London to see thee; and thou must lie still and rest; and get well again, ere we can carry thee out into the garden.’

She was looking at him with those strangely brilliant eyes.

‘But not into the garden,’ she said, in a vacant kind of way. ‘That is all gone away now—gone away. ’Twas long ago—when poor Judith used to go into the garden—and right fair and beautiful it was—ay, and her father would praise her hair, and the colour of it—until he grew angry, and drove her away far from him—and then—and then—she wandered down to the river—and always Susan’s song was in her mind—or the other one, that was near as sad as that, about the western wind, was it not? How went it now?—

"Western wind, when will you blow?"

Nay, I cannot recall it—'tis gone out of my head, grandam, and there is only fire there—and fire—and fire—

"Western wind, when will you blow?"

it went—and then about the rain next, what was it?—

"So weary falls the rain!"

Ay, ay, that was it now—I remember Susan singing it—

"Western wind, when will you blow?"

So weary falls the rain!

O if my love were in my arms,

Or I in my bed again!"

And here she turned away from them and fell a-crying, and hid from them, as it were, covering her face with both her hands.

'Grandmother, grandmother,' they could hear her say through her sobbing, 'there was but the one rose in my garden—and that is gone now—they have robbed me of that—and what cared I for aught else? And Quiney is gone too, without a word or a look—without a word or a look—and ere he be come back—well, I shall be away by then—he will

have no need to quarrel with me and think ill of me that I chanced to meet the parson. 'Tis all over now, grandmother, and done with, and you will let me bide with you for just a little while longer—a little while, grandmother; 'tis no great matter for so little a while, though I cannot help you as I would—but Cicely is a good lass—and 'twill be for a little while—for last night again I found Hamnet—ay, ay, he hath all things in readiness now—all in readiness——' And then she uttered a slight cry—or moan rather. 'Grandmother, grandmother, why do you not keep the parson away from me!—you said that you would!'

'Hush, hush, child,' the grandmother said, bending over her and speaking softly and closely. 'You are over-concerned about the poor lass that was treated so ill. Take heart now; I tell thee all is going well with her; her father hath taken her home again, and she is as happy as the day is long. Nay, I swear to thee, good wench, if thou lie still and restful, I will take thee to see her some of these days. Hush thee now, dearie; 'tis going right well with the lass now.'

The doctor touched the arm of Judith's father, and they both withdrew.

'She knew you not,' said he. 'And the fewer people around her the better—they set her fancies wandering.'

They went downstairs to where Quiney was awaiting them; and the sombre look on their faces told its own tale.

'She is in danger!' he said, quickly.

The doctor was busy with his own thoughts, but he glanced at the young man, and saw the burning anxiety of his eyes.

'The fever must run its course,' said he, 'and Judith hath had a brave constitution these many years that I fear not will make a good fight. 'Twas a sore pity that she was so distressed and stricken down in spirits, as I hear, ere the fever seized her.'

Quiney turned to the window.

'Too late—too late,' said he. 'And yet I spared not the nag.'

'You have done all that man could do,' her father said, going to him. 'Nay, had I myself guessed that she was in such peril—but 'tis past recall now.'

And then he took the young man by the hand and grasped it firmly.

‘Good lad,’ said he, ‘this that you did for us was a right noble act of kindness, and I trust in heaven’s mercy that Judith herself may live to thank you. As for me, my thanks to you are all too poor and worthless ; I must be content to remain your debtor—and your friend.’

CHAPTER X.

AN AWAKENING.

IT was going ill with her. Late one night Quiney, who had kept hovering about the house, never able to sit patiently and watch the anxious coming and going within-doors, and never able to tear himself away but for a few hundred yards, wandered out into the clear starlit darkness. His heart was full. They had told him the crisis was near at hand. And almost it seemed to him that it was already over. Judith was going away from them. And those stars overhead—he knew but little of their names, he understood but little of the vast immensities and deeps that lay between them; they were to him but as grains of light on a darkened floor; and far above that floor rose the wonderful shining city that he had heard of in the Book of Revelation. And already—so wild and

unstrung were his fancies—he could see the four square walls of jasper, and the gates of pearl, and the wide white steps leading up to these; and who was that who went all alone—giving no backward thought to any she was leaving behind—up those shining steps, with a strange light on her forehead and on her trembling hands? He saw her slowly kneel at the gate, her head meekly bowed, her hands clasped. And when they opened it, and when she rose, and made to enter, he could have cried aloud to her for one backward look, one backward thought, towards Stratford town and the friends of her childhood and her youth. Alas! there was no such thing. There was wonder on her face, as she turned to this side and to that; and she went hesitatingly; and when they took her hands to lead her forward, she regarded them—this side and that—pleased, and wondering, and silent; but there was never a thought of Stratford town. Could that be Judith that was going away from them so—she that all of them had known so dearly? And to leave her own friends without one word of farewell! Those others there—she

went with them smiling and wondering, and looking in silence from one to the other—but she knew them not. Her friends were here—here—with breaking hearts because she had gone away and forgotten them, and vanished within those far-shining gates.

And then some sudden and sullen thought of the future would overtake him. The injunctions laid on him by Judith's father could not be expected to last for ever. And if this were to be so—if the love and desire of his youth were to be stolen away from him—if her bright young life, that was so beautiful a thing to all who knew her, was to be extinguished and leave instead but a blankness and an aching memory through the long years—then there might arrive a time for a settlement. The parson was still coming about the house—for the women-folk were comforted by his presence; but Judith's father looked at him darkly, and had scarce ever a word for him. As for Quiney, he moved away, or left the house, when the good man came near: it was safer so. But in the future? When one was freer to act? For those injunctions could not be expected to

last for ever; and what greater joy could then be secured than the one fierce stroke of justice and revenge? He did not reason out the matter much; it was a kind of flame in his heart whenever he thought of it.

And in truth that catastrophe was nearly occurring now. He had been wandering vaguely along the highways—appealing to the calmness of the night, as it were, and the serenity of the starlit heavens, for some quieting of his terrible fears; and then in his restlessness he walked back towards the cottage, anxious for further news and yet scarcely daring to enter and ask. He saw the dull red light in the window, but could hear no sound. And would not his very foot-fall on the path disturb her? They all of them went about the house like ghosts. And were it not better that he should remain here, so that the stillness dwelling around the place should not be broken even by his breathing? So quiet the night was, and so soundless, he could have imagined that the wings of the angel of mercy were brooding over the little cottage, hushing it, as it were, and bringing rest and sleep to the sore-bewildered brain.

He would not go near. These were the precious hours. And if peace had at last stolen into the sick chamber, and closed the troubled eyelids, were it not better to remain away, lest even a whisper should break the charm?

Suddenly he saw the door of the cottage open, and in the dull light a dark figure appeared. He heard footsteps on the garden-path. At first his heart felt like stone, and he could not move, for he thought it was some one coming to seek him with evil news; but presently, in the clear star-light he knew who this was that was now approaching him. He lost his senses. All the black night went red.

‘So, good parson,’ said he (but he clenched his fists together so that he should not give way), ‘art satisfied with thy handiwork?’

There was more of menace in the tone than in the taunt; at all events with some such phrase as ‘Out of the way, tavern-brawler!’ the parson raised his stick, as if to defend himself. And then—the next instant—he was gripped—firm as in a vice; the stick was twisted from his grasp and whirled

away far into the dark ; and forthwith—for it all happened in a moment—five fingers had him by the back of the neck.

There was one second of indecision—what it meant to this young athlete, who had his eyes afire and his mind afire with thoughts of the ill that had been done to the one he loved the dearest, can well be imagined. But he flung his enemy from him—forward—into the night.

‘ Take thy dog’s life, and welcome—coward and woman-striker ! ’

He waited ; there was no answer. And then—all shaking from the terrible pressure he had put on himself, and still hungering and athirst to go back and settle the matter then and there—he turned and walked along the road, avoiding the cottage, and still with his heart aflame, and wondering whether he had done well to let the hour of vengeance go.

But that did not last long. What cared he for this man, that any thought of him should occupy him at such a moment ? All his anxieties were elsewhere—in that hushed small chamber, where the lamp of life was

flickering low, and all awaiting with fear and trembling what the dawn might bring. And if she were to slip away so—escaping from them, as it were—without a word of recognition? It seemed so hard that the solitary figure, going up those far, wide steps should have no thought for them she had left behind. As he saw her there, content was on her face, and a mild radiance, and wonder; and her new companions were pleasant to her. She would go away with them; she was content to be with them; she would disappear amongst them and leave no sign. And Sunday morning after Sunday morning he would look in vain for her coming through the churchyard, under the trees; and there would be a vacant place in the pew; no matter who might be there, one face would be wanting; and in the afternoon the wide meadows would be empty. Look where he might—from the foot-bridge over the river, from Bardon Hill, from the Wier Brake—there would be no more chance of his descrying Judith walking with Prudence—the two figures that he could make out at any distance almost. And what a radiance there used to

be on her face—not that mild wonder that he saw as she passed away with her companions within the shining gates—but a happy, audacious radiance, so that he could see she was laughing long ere he came near her. That was Judith—that was the Judith he had known—laughing, radiant—in summer meadows as it seemed to him—careless of the young men, though her eyes would regard them—and always with her chief secrets and mystifications for her friend Prudence. That was Judith—not this poor worn sufferer, wandering through darkened ways, the frail lamp of her life going down and down, so that they dared not speak in the room. And that message that she had left for him with Prudence—was it a kind of farewell? They were about the last words she had spoken ere her speech lost all coherence and meaning—a farewell before she entered into that dark and unknown realm. And there was a touch of reproach in them too—‘Tell him he did me wrong to think I had gone to meet the parson in the churchyard; ’twas but a chance.’ The Judith of those former days was far too proud to make any such explana-

tion ; but this poor stricken creature seemed anxious to appease every one and make friends. And was he to have no chance of begging her forgiveness for doing her that wrong ; and of telling how little she need regard it ; and how that she might dismiss the parson from her mind altogether, as he had done ? The ride to London : she knew nothing of that ; she knew nothing of her father having come all the way to see her. Why, as they came riding along, by Uxbridge, and Wycombe, and Woodstock, and Enstone, many a time he looked forward to telling Judith of what he had done ; and he hoped that she would go round to the stable and have a word for the Galloway nag and pat the good beast's neck. But all that was over now ; and only this terrible darkness, and the silence of the roads and the trees ; and always the dull, steady, ominous light in the small window. And still more terrible that vision overhead—the far and mystic city ; and Judith entering with those new and strange companions ; regarding this one and that, and ever with a smile on her face and a mild wonder in her eyes ; they leading her

away by the hand ; and she timid, and looking from one to the other, but pleased to go with them, into the strange country. And as for her old friends, no backward look or backward thought for them ; for them only the sad and empty town ; the voiceless meadows ; the vacant space in the pew, to which many an eye would be turned, as week by week came round. And there would be a grave somewhere, that Prudence would not leave untended.

But with the first gray light of the dawn there came a sudden trembling joy—that was so easily and eagerly translated into a wild audacious hope ! Judith had fallen into a sound sleep—a sleep hushed and profound, and no longer tortured with moanings and dull low cries as if for pity. A slumber profound and beneficent ; with calmer breathing and a calmer pulse. If only on the awakening she might show that the crisis was over, and she started on the road—however long and tedious that might be—towards the winning back of life and health !

It was Prudence who brought him the news. She looked like a ghost in the wan

light, as she opened the door and came forth. She knew he would not be far away; indeed his eyes were more accustomed to this strange light than hers, and ere she had time to look about and search for him he was there. And when she told him this news he could not speak for a little while: for his mind rushed forward blindly and wildly to a happy consummation; he would have no misgivings; this welcome sleep was a sure sign Judith was won back to them; not yet was she to go away all alone up those wide, sad steps.

‘And you, Prudence,’ said he—or rather he whispered it eagerly, that no sound should disturb the profound quiet of the house—‘now you must go and lie down—you are worn out—why, you are all trembling——’

‘The morning air is a little cold,’ said she; but it was not that that caused her trembling.

‘You must go and lie down and get some sleep too,’ said he (but glancing up at the window as if all his thoughts were there). ‘What a patient watcher you have been! And now when there is this chance—do,

dear Prudence, go within and lie down for a while——'

'Oh, how could I? How could I?' she said; and unknown to herself she was wringing her hands—not from grief, but from mere excitement and nervousness. 'But for this sleep now the doctor was fearing the worst. I know it, though he would not say it. And she is so weak! Even if this sleep calm her brain—or if she come out of it in her right mind—one never knows—she is so worn away—she might waken only to slip away from us.'

But he would not hear of that. No, no; this happy slumber was but the beginning of her recovery. Now that she was on the turn, Judith's brave constitution would fight through the rest. He knew it; he was sure of it; had there ever been a healthier or happier wench—or one with such gallant spirits and cheerfulness?

'You have not seen her these last two days,' Prudence said, sadly.

'Nay, I fear not now—I know she will fight through,' said he, confidently (even with an excess of confidence, so as to cheer this

patient and gentle nurse). 'And what a spite it is that I can do nothing? Did you ask the doctor, Prudence! Is there nothing that I can fetch him from Warwick?—ay, or from London, for that matter? 'Tis well for you that can do so much for your friend; what can I do but wait about the lanes? I would take a message anywhere, for any of you, if you would but tell me; 'tis all that I can do. But when she is getting better, that will be different—that will be all different then; I shall be able to get her many things, to please her and amuse her; and—and—think of this, Prudence,' said he, his fancies running away with him in his eagerness, 'do you not think, now, that when she is well enough to be carried into the garden—do you not think that Pleydell and I could devise some kind of couch, to be put on wheels, see you, and slung on leather bands, so that it would go easily?—why, I swear it could be made!—and might be in readiness for her; what think you, Prudence? No one could object if we prepared it—ay, and we should get it to go as smooth as velvet, so that she could be taken along the lanes, or through the meadows.'

‘I would there were need of it,’ Prudence said, wistfully. ‘You go too fast. Nay, but if she come well out of this deep sleep, who knows? Pray heaven there be need for all that you can do for her.’

The chirping of a small bird close by startled them—it was the first sound of the coming day.

And then she said, regarding him—

‘Would you like to see Judith—for a moment? ’Twould not disturb her.’

He stepped back, with a sudden look of dismay on his face.

‘What mean you, Prudence?’ he said, quickly. ‘You do not think that—that there is fear? that I should look at her now?’

‘Nay, not so; I trust not,’ she said, simply. ‘But if you wished, you might slip up the stair—’twould do no harm.’

He stooped and took off his shoes and threw them aside; then she led the way into the house, and they went stealthily up the short wooden stair. The door was open an inch or two; Prudence opened it still farther, but did not go into the room. Nor did he;

he remained at the threshold ; for Judith's mother, who was sitting by the bedside, and who had noticed the slight opening of the door, had raised her hand quietly, as if in warning. And was this Judith, then, that the cold morning light, entering by the small casement, showed him—worn and wasted, the natural radiance of her face all fled, and in place of that a dull hectic tone that in nowise concealed the ravages of the fever ? But she slept sound. The bent arm that she had raised to her head ere she fell asleep lay absolutely still. No, it was not the Judith he had known—so gay and radiant and laughing in the summer meadows ; but the wasted form still held a precious life, and he had no mistrust ; he would not doubt ; there was there still what would win back for him the Judith that he had known—ay, if they had to wait all through the winter for the first silver-white days of spring.

They stole downstairs again and went to the front door. All the world was awaking now ; the light was clear around them ; the small birds were twittering in the bushes.

‘ And will you not go and get some sleep

now, Prudence?’ said he. ‘Surely you have earned it, and now there is the chance.’

‘I could not,’ she said, simply. ‘There will be time for sleep by and by. But now, if you would do us a service, will you go over to the town and tell Susan that Judith is sleeping peacefully, and that she need not hurry back, for there be plenty of us to watch and wait. And Julius would like to hear the good news, that I know. Then you yourself—do you not need rest?—why——’

‘Heed not for me, dear Prudence,’ said he, quickly, as if it were not worth while wasting time on that topic. ‘But is there naught else I can do for you? Naught that I can bring for you—against her getting well again?’

‘Nay, ’tis all too soon for that,’ was Prudence’s answer. ‘I would the occasion were here, and sure.’

Well, he went away over to the town and told his tale to those that were astir, leaving a message for those who were not; and then he passed on to his own house and threw himself on his bed. But he could not rest. It was too far away, while all his thoughts

were concentrated on the small cottage over there. So he wandered back thither, and again had assurance that Judith was doing well; and then he went quietly up to the summer-house and sate down there; and scarcely had he folded his arms on the little table, and bent forward his head, than he was in a deep sleep—nature claiming her due at last.

The hours passed; he knew nothing of them. He was awakened by Judith's father; and he looked around him strangely; for he saw by the light that it was now afternoon.

'Good lad,' said he, 'I make no scruple of rousing you. There is better news. She is awake, and quite calm and peaceable, and in her right mind—though sadly weak and listless, poor wench.'

'Have you seen her—have you spoken with her?' he said, eagerly.

'Nay, not yet,' Judith's father said. 'I am doubtful. She is so faint and weak. I would not disturb her——'

'I pray you, sir, go and speak with her!' Quiney entreated. 'Nay, I know what will give her more peace of mind than anything.

And if she begin to recall what happened ere she fell ill—I pray you, sir, of your kindness go and speak with her!’

Judith’s father went away to the house, slowly, and with his head bent in meditation. He spoke to the doctor for a few minutes. But when, after some deliberation, he went upstairs, and into the room, it was his own advice, his own plan, he was acting on.

He went forward to the bedside, and took the chair that the old grandmother had instantly vacated, and sate down just as if nothing had occurred.

‘Well, lass, how goes it with thee?’ he said, with an air of easy unconcern. ‘Bravely well, I hear. Thou must haste thee now; for soon we shall be busy with the brewing.’

She regarded him in a strange way—perhaps wondering whether this was another vision. And then she said faintly :

‘Why are you come back to Stratford, father?’

‘Oh, I have many affairs on hand,’ said he; ‘and yet I like not the garden to be so empty. I cannot spare thee over here much longer. ’Tis better when thou art in the

garden, and little Bess with thee—nay, I swear to thee thou disturbest me not—and so must thou get quickly well and home again.’

He took her hand—the thin, worn, white hand—and patted it.

‘Why,’ said he, ‘I hear they told thee some foolish story about me. Believe them not, lass. Thou and I are old friends, despite thy saucy ways, and thy laughing at the young lads about, and thy lecturing of little Bess Hall—oh, thou hast thy faults—a many of them too—but heed no idle stories, good lass, that come between me and thee. Nay, I will have a sharp word for thee an thou do not as the doctor bids; and thou must rest thee still and quiet; and trouble not thy head, for we want thee back to us at New Place. Why, I tell thee I cannot have the garden left so empty: wouldst have me with none to talk with but goodman Matthew? So now farewell for the moment, good wench: get what sleep thou canst, and take what the doctor bids thee; why, knowest thou not of the ribbons and gloves I have brought thee all the way from London?—I warrant me they will please thee!’

He patted her hand again, and rose and left—as if it were all a matter of course. For a minute or two after the girl looked dazed and bewildered, as if she were trying to recall many things; but always she kept looking at the hand that he had held, and there was a pleased light in her sad and tired eyes. She lay still and silent—for so she had been enjoined.

But by and by she said—in a way that was like the ghost of Judith's voice of old—

‘Grandmother—I can scarce hold up my hand—will you help me?—what is this that is on my head?—’

‘Why, ’tis a pretty lace cap that Susan brought thee,’ the grandmother said, ‘and we would have thee smart and neat ere thy father came in.’

But she had got her hand to her head now; and then the truth became known to her. She began to cry bitterly.

‘Oh, grandmother, grandmother,’ she said, or sobbed, ‘they have cut off my hair, and my father will never look with favour on me again. ’Twas all he ever praised!’

‘Dearie, dearie, thy hair will grow again

as fair as ever—ay, and who ever had prettier?’ the old grandmother said. ‘Why, surely; and the roses will come to thy cheeks, too, that were ever the brightest of any in the town. Thy father?—heardest thou not what he said a moment ago—that he could not bear to be without thee? Nay, nay, fret not, good lass, there be plenty that will right gladly wait for the growing of thy hair again—ay, ay, there be plenty and to spare that will hold thee in high favour and think well of thee—and thy father most of all of them—have no fear!’

And so the grandmother got her soothed and hushed; and at last she lay still and silent. But she had been thinking.

‘Grandmother,’ said she, regarding her thin, wasted hand, ‘is my face like that?’

‘Hush thee, child, thou must not speak more now, or the doctor will be scolding me.’

‘But tell me, grandmother,’ she pleaded.

‘Why, then,’ she answered, evasively, ‘it be none so plump as it were—but all that will amend—ay, ay, good lass, ’twill mend surely.’

Again she lay silent for a while ; but her mind was busy with its own fears.

‘Grandmother,’ she said, ‘will you promise me this—to keep Quiney away ? You will not let him come into the room, good grandmother, should he ever come over to the cottage ?’

‘Ay, and be this thy thanks, then, to him that rode all the way to London town to bring thy father to thee ?’ said the old dame, with some affectation of reproach. ‘Were I at thy age I would have a fairer message for him.’

‘A message, grandmother ?’ the girl said, turning her languid eyes to her with some faint eagerness. ‘Ay, that I would send him willingly. He went to London for me, that I know ; Prudence said so. But perchance he would not care to have it, would he, think you ?’

The old dame listened, to make sure that the doctor was not within hearing—for this talking was forbidden ; but she was anxious to have the girl’s mind pleased and at rest ; and so she took Judith’s hand and whispered to her—

‘A message? Ay, I warrant me the lad would think more of it than of aught else in the world. Why, sweetheart, he hath been never away from the house all this time—watching to be of service to any one—night and day it hath been so—and that he be not done to death passes my understanding. Ay, and the riding to London, and the bringing of thy father, and all—is’t not worth a word of thanks? Nay, the youth hath won to my favour, I declare to thee; if none else will speak for him, I will; a right good honest youth, I warrant. But there, now, sweeting, hush thee; I may not speak more to thee, else the doctor will be for driving me forth.’

There was silence for some time; then Judith said, wistfully—

‘What flowers are in the garden now, grandmother?’

The old dame went to the window—slowly—it was an excuse for not having too much talking going on.

‘The garden be far past its best now,’ said she, ‘but there be marigolds, and Michaelmas daisies——’

‘Could you get me a bit of rosemary, grandmother?’ the girl asked.

‘Rosemary?’ she cried in affright—for the mention of the plant seemed to strike a funeral note. ‘Foolish wench, thou knowest I can never get the rosemary bushes through the spring frosts. Rosemary, truly! What wantest thou with rosemary?’

‘Or a pansy, then?’

‘A pansy, doubtless—ay, ay, that be better now—we may find thee a pansy somewhere—and a plenty of other things, so thou lie still and get well.’

‘Nay, I want but the one, grandmother,’ she said, slowly. ‘You know I cannot write a message to him; and yet I would send him some token of thanks for all that he hath done. And would not that do, grandmother?—could you but find me a pansy—if there be one left anywhere—and a small leaf or two; and if ’twere put in a folded paper, and you could give it him from me, and no one knowing? I would rest the happier, grandmother, for I would not have him think me ungrateful—no, no, he must not think me that. And then, good grand-

mother, you will tell him that I wish him not to see me ; only—only, the little flower will show him that I am not ungrateful ; for I would not have him think me that.'

'Rest you still now, then, sweeting,' the old dame said. 'I warrant me we will have the message conveyed to him ; but rest you still—rest you still—and ere long you will not be ashamed to show him the roses coming again into your cheeks.'

CHAPTER XI.

TOWARDS THE LIGHT.

THIS fresh and clear morning—with a south wind blowing, and a blue sky overhead—made even the backyard of Quiney's premises look cheerful, though the surroundings were mostly empty barrels and boxes. And he was singing, too, as he went on with his task ; sometimes—

*' Play on, minstrèl, play on, minstrèl,
My lady is mine only girl,'*

and sometimes—

*' I bought thee petticoats of the best,
The cloth so fine as fine might be ;
I gave thee jewels for thy chest,
And all this cost I spent on thee,'*

or, again, he would practise his part in the new catch—

*' Merrily sang—the Ely monks—
When rowed thereby—CANUTE THE KING !'*

And yet this that he was so busy about seemed to have nothing to do with his own proper trade. He had chalked up on the wall a space about the size of an ordinary cottage-window ; at each of the upper corners he had hammered in a nail ; and now he was endeavouring to suspend from these supports—so that it should hang parallel with the bottom line—an oblong basket roughly made of wire, and pretty obviously of his own construction. His dinner—of bread and cheese and ale—stood untouched and unheeded on a bench hard by. Sometimes he whistled, sometimes he sang ; for the morning air was fresh and pleasant, and the sunlight all about was enlivening.

Presently Judith's father made his appearance ; and the twisting and shaping of the wire hooks instantly ceased.

'She is still going on well ?' the lad said, with a rapid and anxious glance.

'But slowly—slowly,' her father answered. 'Nay, we must not demand too much. If she but hold her own now, time is on our side ; and the doctor is more than ever hopeful that the fever hath left no serious

harm behind it. When that she is a little stronger they talk of having her carried downstairs—the room is larger—and the window hath a pleasant outlook.'

'I heard of that,' said Quiney, glancing at the oblong basket of wire.

'I have brought you other news this morning,' Judith's father said—taking out a letter and handing it to Quiney. 'But I pray you say nothing of it to the wench; her mind is at rest now; we will let the past go.'

'Nay, I can do no harm in that way,' said the younger man, in something of a hurt tone, 'for they will not let me see her.'

'No, truly? Why, that is strange, now,' her father said, affecting to be surprised, but having a shrewd guess that this was some fancy of the girl's own. 'But they would have her kept quiet, I know.'

Quiney was now reading the letter. It was from one of Judith's father's companions in London; and the beginning of it was devoted to the imparting of certain information that had apparently been asked from

him touching negotiations for the purchase of a house in Blackfriars. Quiney rightly judged that this part had naught to do with him, and scanned it briefly ; and as he went on he came to that which had a closer interest for him.

The writer's style was ornate and cumbersome and confused, but his story in plainer terms was this : The matter of the purloined play was now all satisfactorily ascertained and settled, except as regarded Jack Orridge himself, whom a dire mischance had befallen. It appeared that, having married a lady possessed of considerable wealth, his first step was to ransom—at what cost the writer knew not—the play that had been sold to the booksellers, not by himself, but by one Francis Lloyd. It was said that this Lloyd had received but a trifle for it—and had, in truth, parted with it in the course of a drunken frolic ; but that Gentleman Jack, as they called him, had to disburse a goodly sum ere he could get the manuscript back into his own hands. That forthwith he had come to the theatre, and delivered up the play, with such expressions of penitence and

shame that they could not forbear to give him full quittance for his fault. But that this was not all; for having heard that Francis Lloyd had in many quarters been making a jest of the matter, and telling of Orridge's adventures in Warwickshire, and naming names, the young man had determined to visit him with personal chastisement, but had been defeated in this by Lloyd being thrust into prison for debt. That thereafter Lloyd being liberated from gaol was sitting in a tavern, with certain companions; and there 'Gentleman Jack' found him, and dealt him a blow on the face with the back of his hand, with a mind to force the duello upon him. But that here again Orridge had ill fortune; for Lloyd being in his cups would fight then and there, and flung himself on him without or sword or anything as they thought; but that presently in the struggle Orridge uttered a cry 'I am stabbed,' and fell headlong; and they found him, with a dagger-wound in his side, bleeding so that they thought he would have died ere help came. And that in truth he had been nigh within death's door; and was not yet out of the leech's

hands ; while as for Lloyd he had succeeded in making good his escape—and was now in Flanders, as some reported. This was the gist of the story as far as Quiney was interested ; thereafter came chiefly details about the theatre ; and the writer concluded with wishing his correspondent all health and happiness, and bidding him ever remember ‘his true loving friend Henry Condell.’

Quiney handed back the letter.

‘I wish the dagger had struck the worser villain of the two,’ said he.

‘’Tis no concern of ours,’ Judith’s father said. ‘And I would have the wench hear never a word more of the matter. Nay, I have already answered her that ’twas all well and settled in London, and no harm done ; and the sooner ’tis quite forgotten the better. The young man hath made what amends he could ; I trust he may soon be well of his wound again. And married, is he ?—perchance his hurt may teach him to be more of a stay-at-home.”

Judith’s father put the letter in his pocket, and was for leaving, when Quiney suggested that if he were going to the cottage he would

accompany him, as some business called him to Bidford. And so they set out together—the younger man having first of all made a bundle of the wire basket, and the nails and hooks and what not, so that he could the more easily carry them.

It was a clear and mild October day ; the wide country very silent ; the woods turning to yellow and russet now ; and here and there golden leaves fluttering down from the elms. So quiet and peaceful it all was in the gracious sunlight ; the steady ploughing going on ; groups of people gleaning in the bean-fields ; but not a sound of any kind reaching them, save the cawing of some distant rooks. And when they drew near to Shottery, Quiney had an eye for the cottage-gardens, to see what flowers or shrubs were still available ; for of course the long wire basket, when it was hung outside Judith's window, must be filled—ay, and filled freshly at frequent intervals. If the gardens or the fields or the hedge-rows would furnish sufficient store, there would be no lack of willing hands for the gathering.

They went first to the front door (the

room that Judith was to be moved into looked to the back) ; and, here, ere they had crossed the threshold, they beheld a strange thing. The old grandmother was standing at the foot of the wooden stair, with a small looking-glass in her hand ; she had not heard them approach ; and it was with some amazement that they saw her deliberately let fall the glass on to the stone passage, where naturally it was smashed into a hundred fragments. And forthwith she began to scold and rate the little Cicely ; and that in so loud a voice that her anger must have been plainly heard in the sick-room above.

‘ Ah, thou mischief, thou imp, thou idle brat, that must needs go break the only looking-glass in the house ! A handy wench, truly, that can hold nothing with thy silly fingers, but must break cup, and platter, and pane ; and now the looking-glass—’twere well done to box thine ears, thou mischief ! ’

And with that she patted the little girl on the shoulder, and shrewdly winked, and smiled, and nodded her head ; and then she went up the stair, again and loudly bewailing her misfortune.

‘What a spite be this now!’ they could hear her say at the door of Judith’s room. ‘The only looking-glass in the house—and just as thou wouldst have it sent for! That mischievous idle little wench—heard you the crash, sweetheart? Well, well, no matter; I must still have the tiring of thee—against any one coming to see thee; ay, and I would have thee brave and smart, when thou art able to sit up a bit—ay, and thy hair will soon be grown again, sweeting—and then the trinkets that thy father brought, and the lace cuffs that Quiney gave thee—these and all thou must wear. Was ever such a spite, now—our only looking-glass to be broken so; but thou shalt not want it, sweetheart—nay, nay, thou must rest in my hands—I will have thee smart enough; when any would come to see thee——’

That was all they heard—for now she shut the door; but both of them guessed readily enough why the good dame had thrown down and smashed the solitary mirror of the house.

Then they went within, and heard from Prudence that Judith was going on well but

very slowly ; and that her mind was in perfect calm and content, only that at times she seemed anxious that her father should return to London, lest his affairs should be hindered.

‘ And truly I must go ere long,’ said he, ‘ but not yet. Not until she is more fairly on the highway.’

They were now in the room that was to be given up to Judith, because of its larger size.

‘ Prudence,’ said Quiney, ‘ if the bed were placed so—by the window—she might be propped up so ; that when she chose she could look abroad. Were not that a simple thing, and cheerful for her ? And I have arranged a small matter so that every morning she may find some fresh blossoms awaiting her—and yet not disturbing her with any one wishing to enter the room. Methinks one might better fix it now, ere she be brought down, so that the knocking may not harm her.’

‘ I would she were in a fit state to be brought down,’ Prudence said, rather sadly. ‘ For never saw I any one so weak and helpless.’

All the same he went away to see whether

the oblong basket of wire and the fastenings would fit; and although (being a tall youth) he could easily reach the foot of the window with his hands, he had to take a chair with him in order to gain the proper height for the nails. Prudence from within saw what he was after; and when it was all fixed up, she opened one of the casements to speak to him, and her face was well pleased.

‘Truly, now, that was kindly thought of,’ said she. ‘And shall I tell her of this that you have contrived for her?’

‘Why, ’tis in this way, Prudence,’ said he, rather shamefacedly, ‘she need not know whether ’tis this one or that that puts a few blossoms in the basket—’twill do for any one—any one that is passing along the road or through the meadows, and picks up a pretty thing here or there. ’Twill soon be hard to get such things—save some red berries or the like—but when any can stop in passing and add their mite, ’twill be all the easier, for who that knows her but hath good will towards her?’

‘And her thanks to whom?’ said Prudence, smiling.

‘Why, to all of them,’ said he, evasively. ‘Nay, I would not have her even know that I nailed up the little basket—perchance she might think I was too officious.’

‘And can you undo it?’ she asked. ‘Can you take it down?’

‘Surely,’ he answered; and he lifted the basket off the hooks to show her.

‘For,’ said she, ‘if you would bring it round, might we not put a few flowers in it, and have them carried up to Judith, to show her what you have designed for her? In truth it would please her.’

He was not proof against this temptation. He carried the basket round; and they fell to gathering such blossoms as the garden afforded—marigolds, monthly roses, michaelmas daisies, and the like—with some scarlet hips from the neighbouring hedges, and some broad green leaves to serve as a cushion for all of these. But he did not stay to hear how his present was received. He was on his way to Bidford—and on foot, for he had kept his promise with the Galloway nag. So he bade Prudence farewell, and said he would call in again on his way back in the evening.

The wan, sad face lit up with something like pleasure when Judith saw this little present brought before her ; it was not the first by many of similar small attentions that he had paid her—tokens of a continual thoughtfulness and affection ; though he was not even permitted to see her, much less to speak with her. How his business managed to thrive during this period they could hardly guess ; only, that he seemed to find time for everything. Apparently, he was content with the most haphazard meals ; and seemed able to get along with scarcely any sleep at all ; and always he was the most hopeful one in the house ; and would not admit that Judith's recovery seemed strangely slow ; but regarded everything as happening for the best, and tending towards a certain and happy issue. One result of his being continually in or about the cottage was this—that Master Walter Blaise had not looked near them since the night on which the fever reached its crisis. The women-folk surmised that, now there was a fair hope of Judith's recovery, he perchance imagined his ministrations to be no longer necessary ; and was

considerately keeping out of the way, seeing that he could be of no use. At all events, they did not discuss the subject much; for more than one of them had perceived that, whenever the parson's name was mentioned, Judith's father became reticent and reserved—which was about his only way of showing displeasure—so that they got into the habit of omitting all mention of Master Blaise for the better preserving and maintaining the serenity of the domestic atmosphere.

And yet Master Blaise came to be talked of—and to Judith herself—this very morning. When Prudence went into the room, carrying Quiney's flowers, the old grandmother said she would go down and see how dinner was getting forward (she having more mouths to feed than usual), and Prudence was left in her place, with strict injunctions to see that Judith took the small portions of food that had been ordered her at the proper time. Prudence sate down by the bedside. These two had not had much confidential chatting of late; for Judith had been forbidden to talk much, and was indeed far too weak and languid for that; while generally there was

some third person about, in attendance. But now they were alone ; and Prudence had a long tale to tell of Quiney's constant watchfulness and care, and of all the little things he had thought of and arranged for her, up to the construction of the wire flower-basket.

‘ But what he hath done, Judith, to anger Parson Blaise, I cannot make out,’ she continued ; ‘ ay, and to anger him sorely ; for yesternight, when I went over to see how my brother did, I met Master Blaise, and he stayed me and talked with me for a space. Nay, he spoke too harshly of Quiney, so that I had to defend him, and say what I had seen of him—truly, I was coming near to speaking with warmth—and then he went away from that. And think you what he came to next, Judith ? ’

The pale, quiet face of the speaker was overspread with a blush ; and she looked timidly at her friend.

‘ What then, sweetheart ? ’

‘ Perchance I should not tell you,’ she said, with some hesitation, and then she said, more frankly : ‘ nay, why should there be any concealment between us, Judith ? And

he laid no charge of secrecy on me—in truth I said that I would think of it, and might even have to ask for counsel and guidance. He would have me be his wife, Judith.'

Judith betrayed no atom of surprise ; nay, she almost instantly smiled her approval—it was a kind of friendly congratulation, as it were—and she would have reached out her hand, only that she was so weak.

'I am glad of that, dear mouse,' said she, as pleasantly as she could. 'There would you be in your proper place, isn't not so? And what said you?—what said you, sweetheart?—ah, they all would welcome you, be sure—and a parson's wife—a parson's wife, Prudence—would not that be your proper place?—would you not be happy so?'

'I know not,' the girl said, and she spoke wistfully, and as if she were regarding distant things. 'He had nearly persuaded me, good heart, for indeed there is such power and clearness in all he says ; and it was almost put before me as a duty, and something incumbent on me, for the pleasing of all of them, and the being useful and serviceable to so many ; and then—and then——'

There was another timid glance ; and she took Judith's hand ; and her eyes were downcast as she made the confession :

‘ Nay, I will tell thee the truth, sweet-heart. Had he spoken to me earlier—I—I might not have said him nay—so good a man and earnest withal—and not fearing to give offence if he can do true service to the Master of us all : Judith, if it be unmaidenly, blame me not, but at one time I had thoughts of him ; and sometimes, ashamed, I would not go to your house when that he was there in the afternoon, though Julius wondered, seeing that there was worship and profitable expounding. But now—now ’tis different.’

‘ Why, dear mouse, why ? ’ Judith said, with some astonishment ; ‘ you must not flout the good man. ’Tis an honourable offer.’

Prudence was looking back on that past time.

‘ If he had spoken then,’ said she, absently, ‘ my heart would have rejoiced ; and well I knew ’twould have been no harm to you, dear Judith, for who could doubt how you were inclined—ay, through all your quarrels and

misunderstandings? And if 'twas you the good parson wished for in those days——'

'Prudence,' her friend said, reproachfully, 'you do ill to go back over a bygone story. If you had thoughts of him then, when as yet he had not spoken, why not now when he would have you be his wife? 'Tis an honourable offer, as I say, and you—were you not meant for a parson's wife, sweetheart?'

Then Prudence regarded her with her honest eyes.

'I should be afraid, Judith. Perchance I have listened overmuch to your grandmother's talking, and to Quiney's; they are both of them angered and set hard against him. They say he wrought you ill, and was cruel when he should have been gentle with you, and was over proud of his office. Nay, I marked that your father had scarce ever a word for him when he was coming over to the cottage, but would get away somehow, and leave him. And—and methinks I should be afraid, Judith; 'tis no longer as it used to be in former days; and then, without perfect confidence, how should one dare

venture on such a step? No, no, Judith, I should be afraid.'

'In truth I cannot advise thee, then, dear Prudence,' her friend said, looking at her curiously. 'For more than any I know should you marry one that would be gentle with you and kind. And think you that the parson would overlord it?'

'I know not—I know not,' she said, in the same absent way. 'But with doubt—with hesitation—without perfect confidence—how could one take such a step?'

And then she bethought her.

'Why, now, all this talking over my poor affairs!' she said, more cheerfully. 'A goodly nurse I am proving myself! 'Tis thy affairs are of greater moment, and thou must push forward, sweetheart, and get well more rapidly, else they will say we are careless and foolish that cannot bring thee into firmer health.'

'But I am well content,' said Judith, with a perfectly placid smile.

'Content? but you must not be content!' Prudence exclaimed. 'Would you remain within-doors until your hair be grown? Vanity is it, then? Ah, for shame—you that

always professed to be so proud, and careless of what they thought! Content, truly! Look at so thin a hand—are you content to remain so?’

‘I am none so ill,’ Judith said, pleasantly. ‘The days pass well enough, and every one is kind.’

‘But I say you must not be content!’ Prudence again remonstrated. ‘Did ever any one see such a poor weak white hand as that? Look at the thin, thin veins.’

‘Ah, but you know not, sweetheart,’ Judith said, and she herself looked at those thin blue veins in the white hand; ‘they seem to me to be running full of music and happiness ever since I came out of the fever and found my father talking to me in the old way.’

CHAPTER XII.

‘WESTERN WIND, WHEN WILL YOU BLOW?’

THERE was much laughing among the good folk of Stratford town, or rather among those of them allowed to visit Quiney’s back-yard, over the nondescript vehicle that he and his friend Pleydell were constructing there. But that was chiefly at the first, when the neighbours would call it a coffin on wheels or a grown-up cradle; afterwards, when it grew into shape, and began to exhibit traces of decoration (the little canopy at the head, for example, was covered over with blue taffeta, that made a shelter from the sun), they moderated their ridicule; and at last declared it a most ingenious and useful contrivance, and one that went as easily on its leather bands as any king’s coach that ever was built. And they said they hoped it would do good service; for they knew it was meant

for Judith ; and she had won the favour and good-will of many in that town—in so far as an unmarried young woman was deemed worthy of consideration.

But that was an anxious morning when Quiney set forth with this strange vehicle for the cottage. Little Willie Hart was there, and Quiney had flung him inside, saying he would give him a ride as far as Shottery ; but thereafter he did not speak a word to the boy. For this was the morning on which he was to see Judith for the first time since the fever had left her ; and not only that, but he had been appointed to carry her downstairs to the larger room below. This was by the direct instructions of the doctor. Judith's father was now in London again ; the doctor was not a very powerful man ; the staircase was over narrow to let two of the women try it between them : who, therefore, was there but this young athlete to gather up that precious charge and bear her gently forth ? But when he thought of that first meeting with Judith, he trembled ; and dismay and apprehension filled his heart lest he should show himself in the smallest way shocked by her

appearance. Careless as she might have been of other things, she had always put a value on that ; she knew that she had good looks ; and she liked to show herself pretty and dainty, and to wear becoming and pretty things. And again and again he schooled himself, and argued with himself. He must be prepared to find her changed—nay, had he not already had one glimpse of her, as she lay asleep, in the cold light of the dawn ?—he must be prepared to find the happy and radiant face no longer that, but all faded and white and worn ; the clear-shining eyes no longer laughing, but sunken and sad ; and the beautiful sun-brown hair—that was her chiefest pride of all—no longer clustering round her neck. Not that he himself cared : Judith was for him always and ever Judith, whatever she might be like ; but his terror was lest he should betray—in the smallest fashion—some pained surprise. He knew how sensitive she was ; and as an invalid she would be even more so ; and what a fine thing it would be if her eyes were suddenly to fill with tears on witnessing his disappointment ? And so he argued and argued, and strove to think of Judith as a

ghost—as anything rather than her former self; and when he reached the cottage, he asked whether Judith was ready to be brought down, in so matter-of-fact a way that he seemed perfectly unconcerned.

Well, she was not ready; for her grandmother had the tiring of her, and the old dame was determined that (if she had her way) her grandchild should look none too like an invalid. If the sun-brown curls were gone, at least the cap that she wore should have pretty blue ribbons where it met under the chin. And she would have her wear the lace cuffs, too, that Quiney had brought her from Warwick: did not she owe it to him to do service for the gift? And when all that was done, she made Judith take a little wine and water—to strengthen her for the being carried downstairs—and then she sent word that Quiney might come up.

He made his appearance forthwith—a little pale, perhaps, and hesitating and apprehensive as he crossed the threshold. And then he came quickly forward, and there was a sudden wonder of joy and gladness in his eyes.

‘Judith,’ he exclaimed, quite involuntarily, and forgetting everything, ‘why, how well you are looking!—indeed, indeed you are!—sweetheart, you are not changed at all!’

For this was Judith : not any of the spectral phantoms he had been conjuring up—but Judith herself, regarding him with friendly (if yet timid) eyes ; and her face, as he looked at her in this glad way, was no longer pale, but had grown rose-red as the face of a bride. Her anxiety and nervousness had been far greater than she dared to tell any of them ; but now his surprise and delight were surely real ; and then—for she was very weak—and she had been anxious and full of fear—and this joy of seeing him—of seeing a strange face—that belonged to the former happy time—was too much for her. Her lips were tremulous ; tears rose to her eyes ; and she would have turned away to hide her crying——But that all at once he recalled his scattered senses ; and inwardly cursed himself for a fool ; and forthwith addressed her in the most cheerful and simple way.

‘Why, now, what stories they have been telling me, Judith ! I should scarce know

you had been ill! You are thinner—oh yes, you are a little thinner; and if you went to the woods to gather nuts I reckon you would not bring home a heavy bag; but that will all mend in time. In honest truth, dear Judith, I am glad to see you looking none so ill; now I marvel not at your father going away to see after his affairs, so sure he must have been.'

'I am glad that he went, I was fretting so,' she said (and it was so strange to hear Judith's voice—that always stirred his heart, as if with the vibration of Susan's singing), and then she added, timidly glancing at him: 'And you, I have caused you much trouble also.'

He laughed; in truth he was so bewildered with the delight of seeing this real living Judith before him that he scarce knew what he said.

'Trouble!—yes, trouble indeed, that I could do nothing for you, and all the others waiting with you and cheering you. But now, dear Judith, I have something for you—oh, you shall see it presently; and you may laugh, but I warrant me you will find it easy

and comfortable when that you are allowed to go forth into the garden. 'Tis a kind of couch, as it were, but on wheels—nay, you may call it your chariot, Judith, if you would be in state; and if you may not go farther than the garden at first, why, then you may lie in it, and have some one read to you; and there is a small curtain if you would shut them all out and go to sleep; ay, and when the time comes for you to go along the lanes, then you may sit up somewhat, for there are pillows for your head and for your back. As for the drawing of it, why, little Willie Hart can pull me when I am in it, and surely he can do the same for you, that are scarce so heavy as I, as I take it. Oh, I warrant me, you will soon get used to it; and 'twill be so much pleasanter for you than being always within-doors—and the fresher air—the fresher air will soon bring back your colour, Judith.'

For now that the first flush of embarrassment was gone he could not but see (though still he talked in that cheerful strain) how pale and worn was her face; and her hands, that lay listlessly on the coverlet, with the

pretty lace cuffs going back from the wrists, were spectral hands, so thin and white were they.

'Master Quiney,' said the old dame, coming to the door, 'it be all ready now below, if you can carry the wench down. And take time—take time—there be no hurry.'

'You must come and help me, good grandmother,' said he, 'to get her well into my arms.'

In truth he was trembling with very nervousness as he set about this task. Should some mischance occur?—some stumble?—and then he found himself all too strong and uncouth and clumsy, with her so frail and delicate and weak. But her grandmother lifted the girl's hand to his shoulder—or rather to his neck—and bade her hold on so, as well as she might; and then he got his arms better round her; and with slow and careful steps made his way down to the room below. There the bed was near the window, and when he had gently placed her on it, and propped up her head and shoulders, so that she was almost sitting, the first thing that she saw before her was the slung box of

flowers and leaves, outside the little casement. She turned to him, and smiled, and looked her thanks with grateful eyes ; he sought for no more than that.

Of course they were all greatly pleased at this new state of affairs ; it seemed a step on the forward way, a hopeful thing. Moreover, there was a brighter animation in the girl's look ; whether that was owing to the excitement of the change or the pleasure at seeing the face of an old friend. And as the others seemed busy among themselves, suggesting small arrangements and the like, Quiney judged it was time for him to go ; his services were no longer needed.

He went forward to her.

‘Judith,’ said he, ‘I will bid you good-day now. If you but knew how glad I am to have seen you ; ay, and to find you going on so well ! I will take away a lighter heart with me.’

She looked up at him, hesitating and timid ; and then she gathered courage.

‘But why must you go ?’ said she, with some touch of colour in the pale face.

He glanced at the others.

'Perchance they may not wish me to stay; they may fear your being tired with talking.'

'But if I wish you to stay?' she said, gently. 'If your business call you not?—'

'My business!' he said. 'My business must shift for itself on such a day as this; think you 'tis nothing for me to speak with you again, Judith, after so long a time?'

'And my chariot,' she said, brightly: 'may not I see my chariot?'

'Why, truly!' he cried. 'Willie Hart is in charge of it without. We will bring it along the passage and you will see it at the door: and you must not laugh, dear Judith—'tis a rude-made thing, I know—but serviceable—you shall have comfort from it, I warrant you.'

They wheeled it along the passage, but could not get it within the apartment; however, through the open door she could see very easily the meaning and construction of it. And when she observed with what care and pretty taste it had been adorned for her, even to the putting ribbons at the front corners of the little canopy (but this was not

the work of men's fingers ; it was Prudence who had contributed these), she was not in the least inclined to laugh at the efforts of these good friends to be of use to her and to gratify her. She beckoned him to come to her.

' 'Tis but a patchwork thing to look at,' said he, rather shamefacedly, 'but I hope you will find it right comfortable when you use it. I hope soon to hear of you trying it, Judith.'

'Give me your hand,' said she.

She took his hand and kissed it.

'I cannot speak my thanks to you,' she said, in a low voice, 'for not only this but all that you have done for me.'

There were tears in her eyes ; and he was so bewildered, and his heart so wildly aflame, that he could only touch her shoulder and say—

'Be still now, Judith. Be still and quiet ; and perchance they may let me remain with you a little space further.'

Well, it was a long and a weary waiting. She seemed too content with her feeble state ; there were so many who were kind to her ; and her father sending her messages from London ; and Quiney coming every morning to put some little things—branches of evergreens or the like, when flowers were no longer to be had—in the little basket outside the window. He could reach to that easily ; and when she happened to hear his footsteps coming near, even when she could not see him, she would tap with her white fingers on the window-panes—that was her thanks to him, and morning greeting.

It was a bitter winter ; and ever they were looking forward to the milder weather to see when they might risk taking her out of doors, swathed up in her chariot, as she called it ; but the weeks and weeks went by hard and obdurate ; and at last they found themselves in the new year. But she could get about the house a little now in a quiet way ; and so it was that one morning she and Quiney were together standing at the front window looking abroad over the wide

white landscape. Snow lay everywhere thick and silent; the bushes were heavy with it; and far beyond those ghostly meadows—though they could not see it—they knew that the Avon was fixed and hard in its winter sleep, under the hanging banks of the Wier Brake.

““ Western wind, when will you blow ? ”” she said, and yet not sadly, for there was a placid look in her eyes : she was rather complaining, with a touch of the petulance of the Judith of old.

The hand of her lover was resting lightly on her shoulder—she was strong enough to bear that now ; and did not resent the burden. And she had got her soft sunny-brown curls again, though still they were rather short ; and her face again showed something of its beautiful curves ; and her eyes, if they were not so cruelly audacious as of old, were yet clear-shining and gentle, and with abundance of kind messages for all the world, but with tenderer looks for only one.

““ Western wind,”” she repeated, with that not over-sad complaint of injury ““ when will you blow—when will you blow ? ””

'All in good time, sweetheart, all in good time,' said he; and his hand lay kindly on her shoulder, as if she were one to whom some measure of gentle tending and cheering words were somehow due. 'And guess you now what they mean to do for you when the milder weather comes?—I mean the lads at the school. Why, then, 'tis a secret league and compact—I doubt not that your cousin Willie may have been at the suggesting of it—but 'twas some of the bigger lads who came to me. And 'tis all arranged now; and all for the sake of you, dear heart. For when the milder weather comes, and the year begins to wake again, why, they are all of them to keep a sharp and an eager eye here and there—in the lanes or in the woods—for the early peeping up of the primroses. And then 'tis to be a grand whole holiday that I am to get for them, as it appears; and all the school is to go forth to search the hedgerows and the woods and the banks—all the country-side is to be searched and searched—and for what, think you?—why, to bring you a spacious basketful of the very first primroses of the spring! See you, now,

what it is to be the general favourite!—
nay, I swear to you, dear Judith, that you
are the sweetheart of all of them ; and what
a shame it is that I must take you away from
them all !’

THE END.

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